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Adherence

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To: Hillary Clinton

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Topic: Toward a Youth Development Strategy for Lifelong Benefit

The Clinton administration has made remarkable achievements in tackling a variety of adolescent problems such as smoking, pregnancy, drugs, guns and media violence. Moreover, its emphasis on preventive approaches has been extraordinary. Its initiatives in adolescent education, health, community services, school-to-work transition and crime prevention have travel-blazing significance that is likely to grow in the years ahead.

It would be exceedingly timely and socially useful to draw these strands together into a comprehensive youth development strategy highlighted by a daylong White House conference. This could involve a concise summary of the gains made in these various targeted interventions and relate them to generic interventions that have a fundamental bearing on healthy and constructive adolescent development.

There is a complementary relationship between generic approaches that tackle these underlying factors and targeted approaches that deal with specific problems. For instance, a generic approach can help a shaky adolescent earn self-respect, find a place in a valued and constructive group, and make durable friendships, all of which enhance the individual's resistance to drugs, weapons, or early sexual activity. At the same time, it is important for adolescents to acquire accurate information about each of these major risks and to develop specific skills in avoiding them. In this way, the generic and targeted approaches are mutually supportive.

The conference could lead to an integrated strategy for meeting the crucial needs of adolescent development through a set of front-line, pivotal institutions: family, school, health care and public health, community organizations, religious

institutions and media. It would clarify what government can do and what other powerful institutions can do to meet these basic needs and thereby improve prospects for the future of our country. What is "the village" for American adolescents today? How can it be strengthened to improve the life chances for youth?

Early adolescence is one of the most striking developmental experiences in the entire life span. It means going beyond childhood toward the distant goal of becoming an adult. There is a chasm between these two great phases of life, and it takes a mighty leap to get across. How do our children learn to make the leap? What help do they need in making it? Who helps -- or fails to help -- in this risky process? Why do so many fall into the chasm, never making it to healthy, constructive, productive adult life?

The problems adolescents face are occurring across all of the youth population; no part of the society is exempt from the casualties. Among the more disquieting signs is the emergence in younger adolescents of very high-risk behaviors that were once associated with older groups: early smoking, early alcohol use, early sex, and early alienation from school, even early involvement with deadly weapons.

Early adolescence is a time of profound biological transformation and social transition characterized by exploratory behavior, much of it adaptive and expected for this age group. But carried to extremes, and especially if they become habitual, such behaviors can have lifelong consequences. Many dangerous patterns, in fact, commonly emerge during these years.

Initially, adolescents explore these new possibilities tentatively, with the experimental attitude that is typical of adolescence. Before damaging behavior is firmly established, therefore, there is a unique opportunity to prevent lifelong casualties.

Young adolescents on an effective developmental path must

- ◆ Find a valued place in a constructive group.
- ◆ Learn how to form close, durable human relationships.
- ◆ Earn a sense of worth as a person.
- ◆ Achieve a reliable basis for making informed choices.
- ◆ Express constructive curiosity and exploratory behavior.
- ◆ Find ways of being useful to others.
- ◆ Believe in a promising future with real opportunities.
- ◆ Cultivate the inquiring and problem-solving habits of the mind necessary for lifelong learning and adaptability.
- ◆ Learn to respect democratic values and responsible citizenship.
- ◆ Build a healthy lifestyle.

These requirements can be met by a conjunction of front-line institutions that powerfully shape adolescent development, for better and worse. Research and careful appraisal of best practices has led to useful insights in several areas:

- ◆ The Fundamental Nature of Adolescent Development
- ◆ Strengthening Families for Coping with Adolescence
- ◆ Creating Developmentally Appropriate Schools
- ◆ Schools as Health-Promoting Environments
- ◆ Ensuring Access to Health Services
- ◆ Life-skills Training
- ◆ Social Supports
- ◆ Opportunities in the Nonschool Hours
- ◆ Constructive Potential of the Media

Those institutions that have a major shaping influence on the young must join forces in adapting to the transforming requirements of the new century. In the long run, the vitality of any society and its prospects for the future depend on the quality of its people -- on their knowledge and skill, health and vigor, and the decency of their human relations. Preventing much of the damage now occurring would therefore have powerfully beneficial social and economic impacts, including a more effective work force, higher productivity, lowered health costs, lowered prison costs, and so much relief of human suffering!

There are several strong resources for synthesizing and assessing the research evidence pertinent to this topic:

1. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in which both the President (then governor) and the First Lady participated at various points in the decade of its work
2. The National Academy of Sciences' Forum on Adolescence, created as follow-on to the Carnegie Council. It has been my privilege to chair both the Carnegie Council and the Academy Forum.
3. The National Institute for Child Health and Human Development. With Duane Alexander's excellent leadership, the institute is supporting more research on adolescent development than ever before.

The staff of the NAS Forum and NICHD could be exceedingly helpful in planning the White House conference. Needless to say, I would do everything in my power to be helpful.