

Opportunity Knocks

By Karen Pittman, March/April 1997

Voluntary action. Organizations, associations, corporations across the country are being called upon to make significant, new commitments toward ensuring that more children and youth in the United States have a caring adult, a healthy start, safe places to learn and grow, education for marketable skills and opportunities to give back through services. LensCrafters will give one million eye exams to low-income citizens, many of them children and youth. Kimberly Clark, in partnership with Kaboom, has committed to build playgrounds.

"The Commitment Watch" (in *Newsweek*) presses on as the Presidential Summit on America's Future in Philadelphia, chaired by General Colin Powell, approaches. Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Girls Scouts of America, Communities in Schools, Junior Achievement are among the national youth-serving organizations that have stepped up to the plate to commit to redouble their efforts to reach young people.

I have heard the cynics. Another summit? Where's the follow-up? Or, more pointedly, will the long-term effort drain already limited dollars away from existing programs and initiatives? Why should corporations get the press-making commitments while those who have been working for decades wait for the goodies to trickle down?

Maybe I am an optimist at heart (actually, I know that I am), but this is a superb opportunity to bring new attention and new resources to youth. The questions should not be "will it fail?" but "how can it succeed?"

What can local youth- and family-serving organizations do? Think opportunity. Think scale. Think community wide. Think networks. Offer to partner with teachers to "co-mentor" young people's progress. With schools to create true community centers that operate year-round. With Private Industry Councils to offer guidance, training and support to youth in summer and after-school jobs. With the national youth-serving organizations to help extend their programmatic reach to neighborhoods and populations. With health care providers to increase access. With the Transportation Authority to connect young people to challenging activities beyond their neighborhood. With the government to provide connections and continuity to children and youth in the welfare and juvenile justice systems. With the young people with whom you work to do all of the above and more.

But most important, use this opportunity to partner with each other. As national organizations and corporations make commitments to provide resources — volunteers, services, facilities, funds, incentives — local youth- and family-serving organizations can make commitments to coordinate and deliver them and generate more locally. Get on the map. Go generic. Join with 20 other service providers in your city and commit to go to scale for young people. Bring home the concept that youth organizations and programs have been committed to the five goals of the summit for a very long time. Make alive the idea that caring adults are best able to sustain full, deep relationships with young people when they are supported by organizations that listen to their needs, learn from their experiences, and link and leverage resources. Make the under funded youth service infrastructure so visible and valuable that national and local corporations, organizations and associations will sign on to make it viable. Be creative.

For decades, youth- and family-serving organizations have operated within budget, scaling back services to adjust to scaled-back dollars. This is a chance to operate differently. Make the case. State the goals. Be realistic but commit to what you believe is needed and use this public spotlight to generate resources. See this as a giant endowment or capital campaign for youth. Mobilize your city around the goals.

The summit, and the broader partnership that support it, offers a unique opportunity to talk common sense to the American people. Take it. Those who work with children and youth on a daily basis should be at the head of the line to volunteer their time, expertise, connections to help those now prepared to commit and ensure that their commitments are well placed. Opportunity knocks.

Pittman, K. (1997, March). "Opportunity Knocks." Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment. A version of this article appears in [Youth Today](#).

Karen Pittman is executive director of the Forum for Youth Investment.

March 1, 1997