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Of the youths, by the youths

The Hampton Coalition for Youth is the only U.S. civic program operated in conjunction with teens, for teens.

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HAMPTON - Ivey Hawkins, a Hampton High School senior, has a passion for being involved in her community and has volunteered with various youth planning programs.

But when those programs ended, she found herself searching for new ones. Hawkins soon came across Alternatives Inc., a nonprofit organization that encourages youth leadership development to benefit their communities.

The influence of youth planning and research on decisions made by the City Council fascinated Hawkins so much, she decided to do this on a more regular basis. Today, she's a senior youth planner of the Hampton Youth Committee.

This program, alongside Alternatives Inc. and several other youth-friendly organizations, are all in partnership with the Hampton Coalition for Youth, the nation's only civic program operated in conjunction with teenagers, for teenagers.

Since 1990, the organization has been dedicated to youth and family involvement in the community, said Cindy Carlson, director of the coalition. This has come with unique challenges.

"Citizen-based participation is pretty foreign to city departments," Carlson said.

The group strives to get young people educated and involved with decision-making conferences traditionally left to city officials, Carlson said. That's why in 1996, after the proposal of a youth planning committee to the city of Hampton, the Hampton Youth Committee was established, giving teens a new voice among City Council members.

The group also tries to give youths opportunities to get involved with advisory groups in the city. Carlson describes a successful example in 2004 with the School Investment Panel. She said young people had the chance to discuss the pros and cons of building schools with the official advisers to the school's superintendent. The final goal is getting the chance to work alongside adult professionals and sharing leadership responsibilities.

The Hampton Youth Committee, or HYC, consists of 25 young people who attend public meetings with City Council members to recommend changes to public policies and solutions to community problems. Hawkins gets paid to work after school for 15 hours a week to assist adults as well as other teens in coordinating meetings and projects and discussing topics of concern in the community.

"It has increased my knowledge of the government and implementing change," Hawkins said.

Bradford Knight, 15, is another student working with HYC. Knight's interest was propelled during a public meeting at the West Hampton Community Center. This meeting gave residents the opportunity to grill city officials.

It wasn't until youths starting asking questions that things got interesting.

"The youth ran the whole meeting," said Knight, a Hampton High sophomore. "That kind of shocked

me. I wanted to get involved with something like that."

Knight stressed the success of the HYC on compromise.

Adults and youths have an equal voice, he said, but it's with compromise and taking everyone's opinion into account that makes decisions and outcomes smoother. He said the city gave \$40,000 to the Hampton Coalition for Youth to target issues in the community deemed in need of change. He further described how big a responsibility it was for teens to help make a decision with that amount of money.

HYC has won many awards. In 2006, Hampton was voted as "One of the Best Communities for Young People" by America's Promise, in part for the creation of HYC. The city also has received the "Innovations in American Government Award" from the Ash Institute at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University and the Council for Excellence in Government.

A coming International City Management Association conference in Pittsburgh will feature a video on youth engagement in city planning provided by the Hampton Coalition for Youth, Carlson said. She hopes to set a model for other cities to adapt.

In April, mayors and city council members came from Chicago, Portland, Sacramento and other large cities to get more education on youth development and leadership. Carlson also has spoken in international meetings -- one in Dubai and the other in Mexico -- to discuss similar topics on youth involvement.

The Hampton Coalition for Youth has been an essential part of several projects in Hampton concerning youth service. Some include the Key Clubs, a volunteer club found in all public high schools in Hampton, and the Career Cafe, a program for youths to get information about various career aspects.

Word! Magazine is a publication designed by teenagers with adult assistance to inspire youths to get involved with community projects. The most notable effort from the Hampton Coalition for Youth, however, would be the Teen Center.

The Teen Center has been a 10-year process, Carlson said. Finding the money and a suitable building -- as well as convincing the city of Hampton that such a place for young people was necessary -- wasn't easy, she said.

Scheduled to open in early 2008 in place of what was the Sentara Health and Fitness Center, the Teen Center is a \$2.5 million project with hopes to give young people a place not only to call their own but to grow into more productive members of the community -- and society as a whole.

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