



**Reading Eagle: Tim Leedy** | Kim D. Johnson, left, president/CEO of the YMCA of Reading and Berks County, joins Daphne E. Klahr, executive director of the Reading Recreation Commission, and Pablo Tejada, president/CEO of Olivet Boys & Girls Clubs, at a Chamber breakfast on Wednesday about the changing needs of local youth.

## Area youth program leaders tell Chamber of changes, challenges

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By [Bruce Posten](#)

The core message of three Berks County youth program leaders Wednesday was that educated, healthy and community-minded youths are the hope of the future.

About 80 members of the Greater Reading Chamber of Commerce & Industry heard that message at the monthly breakfast meeting at the Inn at Reading, Wyomissing.

But they also were told of the societal changes that have made serving today's youths a challenge.

In addition, the speakers stressed the need for private and business partnerships to help agencies in their mission to meet youths' needs. Speakers on the topic, "Meeting the Changing Needs of the Youth

of Berks County," were Kim D. Johnson, president/CEO of the YMCA of Reading and Berks County; Daphne E. Klahr, executive director of the Reading Recreation Commission; and Pablo Tejada, president/CEO of Olivet Boys & Girls Clubs of America. "We are not just about recreation, but we are here to help prepare these kids to fill your jobs - to inspire them and keep them learning," Tejada said. "It is a big job and we cannot do it by ourselves; we need partners." Tejada said Olivet programming stresses academic advancement, community leadership and healthy lifestyles." At the end of the day, kids need to do academics well to be prepared for employment," he said. "We want them all to graduate from high school and be inspired to go to college."

Klahr outlined the financial challenges the city faced in recent years to keep recreational programs operating. "In the past four years, we have bounced back as an intergovernmental 501c3 (nonprofit) funded by the city and the school district because we feel the kids in our city need to have the same opportunities as anywhere else," Klahr said. Klahr said the commission operates two recreation centers, Third and Spruce and 11th and Pike, as well as pool, playground and sports programs. But it has made particular strides with after-school programming at its recreation centers, she said, including increased participation in two 2015 state recreation award-winning programs, Girls Leadership Program and Chef Sprout, a six-week cooking program offered twice a year.

Johnson, a 30-year veteran with the YMCA, spoke of her agency's longtime commitment to youth with its five branches in Berks and one in Schuylkill County, providing an expansion of services in such areas as child care, youth shelter, and after-school, summer and special-needs programming. "One of our newer programs is an initiative aimed at seventh graders offering them free membership for a wide variety of activities," Johnson said. She said the initiative is based on research that indicates seventh grade is a critical time in a young person's life when exposure to risk factors such as substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy and dropping out of school greatly increases. Johnson also said the YMCA will hold its first annual Healthy Kids Day on April 23.

In answer to a question, all three youth service representatives pinpointed money and time as the two biggest challenges in providing services to youth. "There are a lot of ways for businesses to partner with us that aren't always so obvious," Klahr said, pointing to how a funeral home once provided a coffin for a community Halloween Parade. "As far as devoting time to our programs, we always have to make sure there is a good fit," added Tejada. "And sometimes the hours we operate don't always match the hours of business volunteers. And, of course, we need consistency, commitment and follow through, because youngsters tend to get attached."

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- See more at: <http://www.readingeagle.com/news/article/area-youth-program-leaders-tell-chamber-of-changes-challenges#sthash.mkl07AaO.dpuf>