

**Report regarding the Opportunity Youth Committee (OY-C) mentoring pilot
Submitted by
United Way Dane County**

COALITION OVERVIEW

The Opportunity Youth Cross Sector Coalition (OY-CSC) was established in October of 2018 due to a surge in the number of acts of violence and crimes committed by adolescents in the City of Madison and surrounding communities. An assessment of Madison Police Department data suggests that while crime committed by youth is down overall, the escalating number of incidents has been mainly driven by a group of several dozen young people. In 2018, there were 133 car theft cases filed with the Dane County court, and 27 youth accounted for 90 of those 133 cases. Due to these youth involved incidents key stakeholders from the Madison Metropolitan School District, City of Madison, Madison Police Department, Juvenile Court, UW-Madison Morgridge Center, Dane County Human Services, and United Way requested a coalition that focuses on strengthening collaborations across sectors to specifically target groups of adolescents that demonstrate a need for immediate and intense support.

PILOT STRUCTURE:

In 2019, after engaging with one another and with justice involved youth, the OY-CSC identified a need for intensive mentoring and conducted an eight week pilot program that included three mentoring organizations and seven opportunity youth. Four established mentoring agencies advised the coalition and three of them participated in the pilot program: Trained to Grow, Charles Hamilton Houston Institute, Nehemiah and The Mellowood Foundation. Representatives from the DA's office, Human Services, State Public Defender's office and Juvenile Court Program identified seven youth whose cases met at least two of the three qualifiers: (1) habitual offenders, (2) serious offenders, and/or (3) identified by Law Enforcement or their School of attendance. The Juvenile Reception Center (JRC) staff contacted parents of identified youth to describe the program and solicit consent to participate and share confidential information with the mentors. One mentor from Trained to Grow was matched with three youth, another from Charles Hamilton Houston Institute was also matched with three youth, and a Nehemiah mentor was partnered with one youth. The mentoring organizations then followed up with the family and used their own processes for matching youth with a mentor.

The OY-CSC evaluated the pilot program through weekly surveys to track the mentor and mentee's developing relationship and hosted two group mentor meetings where mentors came together to discuss strategies and long-term engagement needs. During the eight-week pilot, there were a total of 42 in person meetings between mentors and mentees, and approximately 93 phone calls or text communications. The pilot program was used to identify systemic barriers and inform next steps regarding scaling and programming.

LESSONS LEARNED

Youth involved with the Juvenile Justice system often struggle with the transition back into society. Understanding court limitations, re-enrolling in school, and rebuilding positive relationships can be difficult to navigate for a child as young as 13 years old. The Opportunity Youth Mentoring program targets youth that are most at risk for recidivism and works with them through the numerous barriers that often lead to a cycle of re-incarceration. Throughout the pilot, it became apparent that this type of intervention requires specially trained mentors with the following competencies:

- 1.) Capacity to be a full-time mentor.** Through the weekly survey, the OYC realized that many of the youth involved in this program lack positive role models. This creates a strong dependency on the mentor in a youth's initial transition from the juvenile justice system.
- 2.) Similar lived experiences as the mentees and mirror the population they are serving.** The mentors have established positive relationships with these adolescents where other adults have not been able to. This is primarily because the mentors live in similar communities, can relate to their mentee's experiences, and don't have any court ordered objectives like many of the other adults these youth meet throughout the juvenile justice system.
- 3.) Ability to navigate the juvenile justice system and advocate for their mentee.** This is a unique requirement to this type of intervention but is critical for success. Mentors need to know

the juvenile justice system and be able to work with social workers, judges, parents, and school administrators in order to connect their mentees with support systems and advocate on behalf of them.

Mentors were asked to report weekly on their mentee's social and emotional competencies including positive identity, social awareness, self-management, and resilience. The two most critically low social and emotional competencies were the mentee's resilience and positive identity. Specifically, mentees often felt they couldn't achieve their personal goals due to the obstacles they faced, and they rarely mentioned other role models in their daily lives. From these reports we've learned that the mentees' struggle with resilience and positive identity derives from limited support and economic opportunities.

Parental Connections: Parental involvement was a significant challenge throughout the entire pilot. Many mentors reported failed attempts to contact parents either by phone or in-person. This proved to be a barrier for mentors getting matched with mentees, which requires parental permission and for reviewing and revising a youth's Individualized Education Program (IEP). OY-CSC recognizes that parental engagement is critical to the success of mentees, especially within school, and is already working to connect with schools to improve communication with parents for long term programming.

Economic Opportunities: Mentees often don't have the finances to pay for common school necessities like lunch, bus tickets, school supplies or even a homecoming dress. These setbacks individually may seem small, but they accumulate for opportunity youth and increase their feelings of being different from their academic peers. This emerging trend for opportunity youth has made economic opportunities a priority for a long-term mentoring program. We predict that matching youth with local jobs, through the support of their mentors, will help establish some economic independence and help them reconnect to their surrounding community.

Community Support: Additionally, several mentees reported feeling stigmatized by their school and community that they are "*already written off as a criminal.*" This type of stereotyping can lead to low positive identity and feelings that their positive changes go unnoticed. In schools, this stigmatization can manifest as more rigorous supervision, zero tolerance policies and harsher penalties for opportunity youth than their academic peers. Due to these community conditions, opportunity youth are often discouraged from returning to school which can lead to dropping out, exacerbated sense of isolation, and increased likelihood of re-incarceration.

The OY-CSC long-term mentor program intends to address these problems through the following solutions:

- (1) Offer school transition mentoring, focused on getting school supplies, homework help, and to prepare mentees to re-engage with school and increase their confidence and desire to return.
- (2) Establish collaborative support with MMSD to ensure that OY-CSC connects with other in-school programs and establishes proper support channels for opportunity youth during the school day.

POSITIVE CHANGES & SUCCESSES

Historically, the juvenile justice system has consistently focused on young peoples' mistakes and negative behavior. In order to combat the unsupportive environment, they are accustomed to, the foundation of this pilot is rooted in an asset based approach. We believe the only way for opportunity youth to achieve meaningful social change is through positive recognition, encouragement, and opportunities to control and manage their own futures. During the pilot, mentors and mentees rapidly developed positive and meaningful relationships that focused on the skills and assets of the youth. As OY-CSC tracked the developing relationship between mentors and mentees, we identified three significant successes: (1)

Additional Youth Engagement (2) Improved Core Competencies, and (3) Academic Ambition and Confidence.

Additional Youth Engagement: One of the most surprising impacts from the pilot program was its ripple effect among other at-risk youth. For example, Trained to Grow initially was matched with three youth, but by the end of the pilot program informally mentored five of their peers. This demonstrates how this program doesn't just impact the mentee but can also help other at-risk youth that were otherwise disconnected and disengaged.

Improved Core Competencies: One of the most critical aspects driving the success of this pilot was that opportunity youth genuinely felt comfortable talking to and relying on their mentor. Finding positive role models is important for a child's resilience and sense of self-worth, and it is often the first step in building community networks. Through encouragement from their mentor, many of the opportunity youth are now engaging in new activities and experiences that are improving their self-sufficiency. Mentor and mentee activities vary, but many youth are learning how to cook, use public transportation, apply for jobs, set and achieve goals, and communicate their emotions.

Academic Ambition and Confidence: Before school started, several mentors reported that their mentees already had a plan to be successful in school and build a positive school environment. This observation is a critical distinction of this pilot. Instead of telling mentees what they need, mentors embraced their independence and ability to figure out their own path to a successful school year. Many of the mentees demonstrated confidence in setting ambitious academic goals, "*I want to get a 3.7 GPA this semester,*" knowing they can rely on their mentors for guidance and motivation.

NEXT STEPS

This pilot has given us insight on the obstacles opportunity youth are facing and the critical need for a cross system mentoring structure. All three mentors involved in this pilot program have committed to supporting opportunity youth beyond the pilot while OY-CSC works to build capacity and to establish stable funding.

Funding: OY-CSC estimates from this pilot, that each youth cost approximately \$4,200 to mentor. To date, the Opportunity Youth Mentoring program has operated with minimal funding. American Family Insurance has contributed \$4,500 for programming and mentee support costs and Dane County Human Services has provided gift cards to mentors, mentees, and families. Over the next two years (2020 and 2021), United Way will contribute \$270,000 to serve 37 justice involved youth. Dane County has committed to investing \$100,000 each year into mentoring for justice involved youth and those at risk of justice involvement of 12 additional youth bring the total amount of youth served to 49.

Community of Practice: The OY-CSC is also developing a monthly community of practice for mentors that work with justice involved youth. The community of practice will support the challenges mentors face and connect them to resources to support their work. The community of practices is intended to establish a feedback loop for the OY-CSC, in order to identify any systemic trends that mentors are observing and ensure that the program design can quickly adapt to any emerging issues.

Evidence Based Model: In order to scale the program, OY-CSC intends to strengthen its alignment to an evidence-based practice with the Credible Messenger mentoring model. Credible Messenger is a national recognized mentoring model for justice-involved youth that focuses on cognitive behaviors, positive youth development, community partnerships and is delivered by mentors with backgrounds similar to those of the mentee. In an impact evaluation of Arches Transformative Mentoring Program, which uses the Credible Mentoring model, found that participants (1) were less likely to be reconvicted of a crime,

(2) showed improvements in self-perception and relationships with others, and (3) reported very close and supportive relationships with mentors. The OY-CSC will build upon this pilot and the Credible Messenger model to standardize processes, connect with the school districts and Madison' mentoring community, and establish community and economic opportunities for mentees.

PARTNERS INVOLVED

- United Way of Dane County
- Madison Metropolitan School District – Office of Youth Re-engagement
- City of Madison, Office of the Mayor
- Madison Police Department
- Dane County Department of Human Services
- Dane County Juvenile Reception Center
- Dane County Juvenile Courts
- Dane County Board of Supervisors
- American Family Insurance Institute for Corporate and Social Responsibility
- University of Wisconsin-Madison Morgridge Center for Public Service
- Trained to Grow Incorporated
- Big Brothers Big Sisters of Dane County
- Nehemiah Center for Urban Leadership Development
- Charles Hamilton Houston Institute
- The Mellowood Foundation