Opportunity Says It All
How Five Communities Are Supporting the Transformation, Education and Employment Success of Young Black Men

Kisha Bird
December 2013

CLASP
policy solutions that work for low-income people

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is a part of CLASP's Corners to Credentials (C2C) Project. The C2C Project documents how local practice and policy supports the transformation, education, and employment success of disconnected and disadvantaged youth.

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[1]For the purposes of this report, the real names of the young men have been changed.

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Kevin is a 21-year-old from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

"Last year, a couple of things happened. Reality really clicked for me; I had no job, and my aunt was struggling with the bills and threatening to kick me out. I was stuck and trying to figure out what I was going to do. Then, one night, a friend of mine was killed on my block. I had just walked in the house. I came back out and saw the body. I didn't even recognize him, and I was traumatized. Out of everyone, I wouldn't expect him to die; he wasn't even into the streets. He just got caught at the wrong place at the wrong time. I started thinking that the same thing could happen to me and [began] reflecting on what I wanted out of life. I knew then that I had to go to school and do something with myself.

"I dropped out of school in 12th grade. It's crazy to think about that now, because I was a good student; I earned As and Bs. When I turned 18, I got into a conflict with my aunt and I moved out and went to live with my mom. Things went downhill from there. I lived with my aunt all of my life and, when I moved away, I really didn't have anyone who was pushing me to do the right thing. Eventually, I stopped going to school and started hanging with the wrong crowd, and selling weed. I was drifting away. Then I got a job at Wendy's and I thought I was the man, so I dropped out of school. Within a few months, I was fired from my job, my relationship with my mom was getting worse, and I didn't have a stable home. All the while, more of my friends were dying in my neighborhood every day.

I eventually moved back in with my aunt, and I was on the hunt. I had been applying to different programs, but all of them helped you get your GED and I didn't want a GED—I wanted my high school diploma."

After enrolling in a program that offered a high school diploma, Kevin changed…

"I really wanted to do something with my life, help myself and help others. I decided I was going to try my hardest; I was putting in the time and effort, staying after school until 6 o'clock at night."

Kevin is making great progress towards earning his high school diploma. He plans to earn a degree in biomedical engineering, get a car, buy a house, and help support his family. He wants very much to inspire his peers and family members to do better…

"Then I would feel content."

Introduction

The daily lives of young black men living in communities of high-concentrated poverty can be a complex maze of split-second decisions, each of which challenges their safety and ability to attend work or school, visit family, or run routine errands. Living in resource-poor communities, young black men have less access to positive work opportunities and social capital. Social capital, the fabric of a given community, is often referred to as the pool of human resources and networks that enable a community to thrive. In absence of strong social capital, young black men are often left to fend for themselves. They are often forced to make choices under extreme distress, with little modeling or insight into the lasting impact and those choices will have on their lives. The physical and psychological toll this places on young minds cannot be underestimated.

Young black men endure some of the worst employment and education outcomes. High school graduation rates of African American students nationally and in many of the nation's school districts continue to lag behind their white counterparts. Available data for high school graduation rates for black males in Baltimore Public School District, Philadelphia Public School District, and Los Angeles Unified School District show that less than half of the black male population graduate on time (40 percent, 24 percent, and 41 percent respectively)[i]. Employment levels are just as ghastly. Just 13 percent of all black male teens age 16 to 19 are employed, down six percentage points from a decade ago.[ii] For young adults age 20 to 24, black men lag behind their white counterparts by 12 percentage points, with 49 percent being employed.[iii]

Black youth are disproportionately disconnected from education and employment. While they account for just 13 percent of all youth ages 16-24, they represent 32 percent of all out-of-school and out-of-work youth in that range.[iv] They are also more likely to live in communities

> *"My son was born when I was 16 and he was really sick when he was born up until he was about 18 months old, so I had to take off from school a lot to be at the hospital until he got better. That's how I got behind and ended up dropping out."*
>
> *- Youth Focus Group Participant*

of concentrated poverty than any other racial group. And research suggests that people who live in communities of concentrated poverty are more likely to experience violence and to be victims of violence.[v] These are grim realities for young black men.

Despite the odds facing young black men living in poor and low-income communities, the young men we met possessed a great sense of purpose. The fact that they were not only alive, but thriving was amazing. The set of programs and services, coupled with caring staff and positive adult connections, provided more than just tangible employment and education skills. For them, the engagement was part of a rebuilding process that restored their sense of self and accomplishment and established a new and vibrant social capital that defied grim statistics. But these are the most fortunate males; most don't have access to these services because funding and infrastructure are insufficient to deliver services at scale.

CLASP embarked on this project with a particular interest in understanding the essential mix of policies and practices needed to support young black men on a positive transformative journey that includes successful transitions to work, school, and life. Acknowledging that it takes much more than a single quality youth program—or even several programs—to address the disparities and inequalities young black men face, we worked with five communities in the Communities Collaborating to Reconnect Youth (CCRY) Network[2]: Baltimore, MD.; Hartford, CT; Los Angeles, CA; Philadelphia, PA; and San Diego, CA. Each of these communities has a deep history of developing and sustaining community-wide partnerships and interventions for disconnected and disadvantaged youth. In every location, we sought to answer the question *"what does it take to support, reengage, and reconnect young black men to school, work, and opportunity?"* from three distinct perspectives: the local leaders and administrators who plan, fund, and implement education and employment interventions; the

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youth staff and advocates who work directly with the young men; and the young men themselves.

The premise of the project and this initial report is not to rehash all that is wrong with young black men—what they cannot attain, what the statistics say about their current and future prospects, and the dire need to address the disparities they cope with daily. This report is designed to demonstrate the tenacity, resilience, and sheer determination of young black men and the local leadership, policies, interventions, and staff commitment assembled and invested in their success. Infused with direct quotes and real life stories from the young men themselves, this report:

• Describes how select stakeholders in five communities (community/systems leaders, youth development/ case management staff, and young black men) articulate and define success for disconnected and off-track young black men;

• Discusses how communities have designed interventions and supportive policies for disconnected and off-track youth;

• Lays out successful approaches and interventions that attract young men into programs and offers examples that address the needs of young black men; and

• Highlights barriers to employment faced by young black men and the strategies utilized by workforce systems and programs to get them employed.

Across the country, public discourse is shining a light on out-of-school, out-of-work young people ages 16 to 24—commonly referred to as "disconnected youth" or "opportunity youth."[vi] Emerging philanthropic and federal initiatives[3] are grappling with countless questions. *What works, especially for those youth without a high school diploma? Which policies would produce better education and employment outcomes? What is the return on investment?*

Too often, the public dialogue fails to focus on how policy and practice disproportionly impact particular populations, such as young black men. It is critical that policies and practices take into account factors like race, gender, and geography and be intentional in directing resources and attention to support adequate services to disadvantages populations.

Youth unemployment cannot be exclusively attributed to the Great Recession and our slow economic recovery. Similarly, the leaky K-12 education pipeline that hemorrhages thousands of young black men annually was not created overnight. Thus, we must rely not on short-term fixes, but long-term solutions that improve overall economic and life circumstances for youth. And while one cannot simply ignore the sobering statistics about young, poor, and low-income black men, overemphasizing the negative diminishes the intrinsic promise that young people possess despite their circumstances. Applying an assets-based perspective, we can create strategies with and on behalf of youth that open doors to infinite possibilities. In short, leaders and stakeholders must re-imagine the landscape for young black men.

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[3]Select emerging philanthropic and federal initiatives include the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions, Interagency Forum on Disconnected Youth and White House Council for Community Solutions.

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of the Corners to Credentials (C2C) Project is to document and uplift the important work that is occurring in communities to connect young black men to the education, training, and supports that prepare them for success in the labor market and in life. From January 2013 through May 2013, CLASP staff conducted five site visits, follow-up phone calls, and meetings in each of the participating C2C communities: Baltimore, MD; Hartford, CT; Los Angeles, CA; Philadelphia, PA; and San Diego, CA. In each community, site visits were coordinated by public and nonprofit entities responsible for overseeing their local youth workforce system, including: Baltimore Mayor's Office of Employment Development, Capital Workforce Partners (Hartford), City of Los Angeles Economic & Workforce Development Department (formerly the Community Development Department), Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN), and the San Diego Workforce Partnership (SWP). Each site visit entailed three primary components:

1. Community Leadership: Interviews and roundtables with key stakeholders across multiple systems to understand the approaches, policies, funding streams, champions, and obstacles to organizing community resources in support of these young black men. CLASP met with over 40 community leaders, including workforce investment board members, Youth Council leaders and representatives, representatives from local foundations, adult education and youth development providers, local school district and higher education staff and leaders, child welfare and juvenile justice advocates and administrators, and employers.

2. Case Managers/Youth Workers: Interviews and roundtables were conducted with 35 program staff and case managers to better understand the interventions that correlate with success and those challenges that pose the greatest barriers to success.

3. Youth Focus Groups: CLASP conducted 10 youth focus groups with young men of color, the majority of whom self-identified as black or African American.

There were 80 participants, all between the ages of 16 and 24, who fell into one of three categories: 1) out-of-school youth without a high school diploma or GED; 2) out-of-school youth with a high school diploma or GED experiencing barriers to employment and not enrolled in postsecondary education; and 3) in-school youth (overage and under-credited) enrolled in alternative education program or a specific back-on-track intervention. Participants were recruited by community partners in each of the cities. Six in-depth individual interviews were also conducted with young black men across the communities to chronicle their stories and further understand the challenges and experiences facing young black men.

Re-imagining the Landscape: Reflections of Local Stakeholders

In each of the five communities, we met with a representative cross-section of leaders and administrators from various public systems and sectors—all of whom were invested in seeing their young people thrive and prepared for work and life.
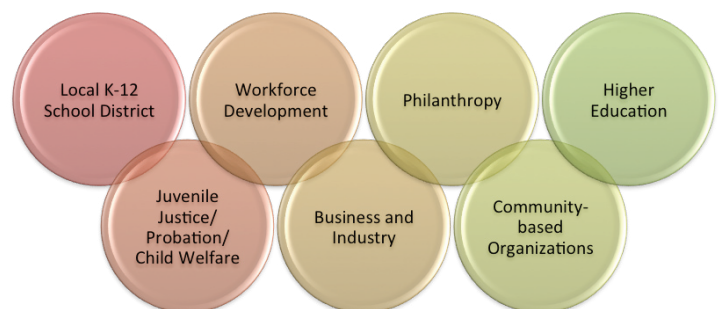
We asked them to share from their perspective:

• What brings people and systems together?

• What policies or practices are essential to a re-imagined landscape for young black men?

• What constitutes success for your collaborative and for the young men?

WHAT BRINGS PEOPLE AND SYSTEMS TOGETHER

Local leaders were initially motivated by *an obligation to tackle specified community-wide issues,* such as the dropout crisis, neighborhood and gang violence, high unemployment, or teen pregnancy. But given the interconnectedness of these issues, they were also equally motivated by a *shared understanding that their individual systems or programmatic goals for young people could not be accomplished through a single approach.* They expressed that, in order to advance broad goals for young people, solutions must be comprehensive and coordinated across sectors.

The community collaborations we studied have been grappling with these issues for nearly two decades. Official names and host organizations may have changed over time, but the stakeholders and leadership had largely remained the same. They spanned political and funding cycles and kept the pressure on elected officials, foundations and donors, service providers, and each other to take ownership of their communities and make young people a priority. And over time, they continued the collection and analysis of data that enabled leaders to make informed decisions, raise the visibility of youth challenges, and mobilize stakeholders to rethink policy and service delivery.

Given this sense of obligation to address youth issues and the shared understanding that systems would need to work collaboratively in order to create long-term solutions, communities engaged in varied strategies to spur innovation and the expansion of youth services. For example:

• Baltimore: The Baltimore Youth Opportunity (YO!) impact study[vii] became a catalyst for additional youth-serving systems to partner with the Mayor's Office of Employment and Development. Notably, the study demonstrated positive outcomes for offenders[4], gave credibility to the delivery system, and further established the YO! system as an effective approach to support youth offenders and foster care

youth, spurring new partnerships with those systems, including the PACT Evening Reporting Center for youthful offenders.

• Los Angeles: There was major pressure from a range of community advocates to change the Los Angeles Unified School District's policy of criminalizing routine school infractions and establish new alternatives to suspensions, expulsions, and other punitive actions. Simultaneously, LA redesigned its youth workforce system. As LA's comprehensive "Back on Track" dropout recovery system— a partnership between the workforce system and the school district targeting high school dropouts and students at high risk of dropping out was launched, it became a central alternative to new school district discipline policy.[viii]

• San Diego: Recognizing that San Diego's system of youth services needed strengthening and better coordination, stakeholders came together with a vision for a "Youth Czar" and a county-wide Youth Development Office (YDO). The YDO strategy has resulted in a commitment to collaborate from City of San Diego (Office of the Mayor, Police Department, Unified School District, Parks & Recreation, and Commission on Gang Prevention and Intervention), County of San Diego (Probation Department and Health & Human Services Agency), San Diego Organizing Project, and the San Diego Workforce Partnership. Driven by a community response to youth homicide, the YDO has conducted a community engagement process to develop a community approach to positive youth development through a community assessment effort targeting neighborhoods with particular needs around violence prevention, education, and employment.

• Hartford: With support from the Hartford Public Giving Foundation, experts from the adult education, community college, and workforce systems jointly launched several pilot initiatives to address literacy, employment, and credentialing in low-income populations across the state, including African American and Latino men. The workforce board is also work-

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[4]The study showed YO! Members were one third less likely to be arrested and convicted than non-participants; and half as likely to be arrested for violent crimes as non-participants. They also earned 35% more and were employed at a 42% higher rate than non-participants.

ing with a strong community provider, OPP, Inc. "to craft a pipeline program to connect low income disconnected youth with the advanced manufacturing industry in the Hartford region."

• Philadelphia: The Mayor's Commission on African American Males, reestablished in 2011 by Mayor Michael Nutter through an executive order, works through six committees (health, policy, communications, economic development, jobs, and education) to connect disparate community and city initiatives. It also provides recommendations directly to the Mayor on how policies can support achievement, employment and overall well-being for black men and boys.

POLICIES AND PRACTICES ESSENTIAL TO A RE-IMAGINED LANDSCAPE

The success of young black men was supported by decision-makers of the key systems and stakeholders charged with developing and funding cross-systems youth policies and interventions. The population of disconnected youth is not homogenous, and leaders recognized the need for policies and practices specific to various subgroups based on their abilities and circumstances. As such, the shift in behavior, attitude, and outlook of young black men cannot be attributed to any one policy.

A range of factors contributed to their development and success. Some essential elements include:

Multiple education options for high school dropouts and other vulnerable youth populations (such as offenders, foster care youth, and overage and under-credited students) that help youth gain secondary and postsecondary credentials

Each C2C community has established multiple education options for its out-of-school and vulnerable youth populations. The local school system is an essential partner in creating education options that allow young men to earn secondary and postsecondary credentials. To foster black male achievement and ensure credential

attainment, it is critical that local school districts have strong, formalized partnerships with: employers; industry and postsecondary institutions; adult education providers; higher education institutions; and other youth-serving systems that young black men have substantial contact with, such as juvenile justice, probation, or foster care. For example:

• Partnering Between School Districts and Workforce Systems: The Baltimore Mayor's Office of Employment Development has a long-term partnership with Baltimore City Public Schools (BPS) and operates three successful secondary school options for struggling and out-of-school youth, including the ACCE Academy in partnership with Johns Hopkins University, the Career Academy, and the Youth Opportunity Academy. Through formal memoranda of understanding and funding agreements, school district staff provide academic instruction to students, while workforce and youth development staff offer much-needed wrap around supports, such as career-awareness and job-readiness training, counseling, and tutoring. In Los Angeles, Youth Opportunity Boyles Heights and Youth Opportunity Watts also have integrated education options that support youth's attainment of a high school diploma or GED.

• Pathways to PostSecondary: Several communities have reformed their youth delivery systems by giving leadership and workforce funding preference to providers that create interventions linking young people to postsecondary opportunities and credentials no matter where they enter the education pipeline. For instance, Philadelphia implemented a GED-to-College model utilizing strategies that allow participants to gain secondary credentials and receive support through postsecondary enrollment. San Diego revised its Workforce Investment Act Request for Proposal (RFP) process to require that community-based organizations partner with secondary education, adult education, or postsecondary institutions, including community colleges and/or public and non-profit universities to support youth pathways toward

postsecondary credentials.   In Los Angeles, the City and the Los Angeles Community College District have a similar partnership that includes nine technical colleges and postsecondary institutions.

Policies and practices to address the overrepresentation of African American males in the juvenile justice system

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, one in three black men can expect to go to prison in their lifetime.[xi]   And black youth routinely face harsher punishments for school infractions than their white counterparts, leading to early and frequent interactions with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system. Recent data by the U.S. Department of Education reveals African American students are arrested far more often than their white classmates.[xii]   Communities seeking to improve education and workforce outcomes for young black men must also consider how school discipline, truancy, and juvenile justice policies support or impede their growth and learning. Baltimore, Los Angeles, and Hartford did such analysis.

• Reshaping School Discipline: In Los Angeles, a coalition of advocates and leaders spurred a groundbreaking partnership between Los Angeles city officials, police, and school officials that reformed school discipline policy to better address the unique needs of troubled youth. Research confirmed two disturbing truths: students who are arrested were more likely to drop out of high school; and African American youth were disproportionately disciplined. The majority of young people received citations for truancy, disturbing the peace, and tobacco possession.[xiii] In the past, youth and parents could be fined $250 for the first truancy infraction (missing or being late to school) and as much as $400 for a subsequent infraction. Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is now moving away from this punitive behavior toward offering students counseling and other supportive services. Students identified as at-risk of dropping out and facing other challenges are also referred to

the city's Back on Track dropout recovery network, operated through the Economic & Workforce Development Department.

• Creating Community-Based Alternatives to Detention: In Baltimore City, the Pre-Adjudication Coordination and Transition (PACT) Center is a cross-system collaboration that addresses young black males and their disproportionate contact with the juvenile justice system. An outgrowth of recommendations from the Baltimore City Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) Advisory Board to decrease DMC by creating community-based alternatives to detention[xiv], PACT is an evening reporting center designed to serve young men ages 14 to 18 who would otherwise be in juvenile detention with the Department of Juvenile Services. Young men are referred to the Center by the Court. Located at YO! Baltimore Westside Center,[5] it operates during the "prime time for juvenile crime," between 3pm and 9pm.[xv] PACT employs youth development approaches that address the underlying issues that lead to deviant behavior and works to ensure youth attend their adjudication hearings. Staff also work with the young men and their families to create individual service plans that will inform sentencing recommendations of the Department of Juvenile Services and the Courts.

• Targeting Funding to Particular Sub-Groups: Connecticut has made tremendous progress in advancing progressive juvenile justice policy over the last twenty years, moving from one of the most punitive states to one of the most enlightened, thanks to its continuum of community-based youth services.[xvi] For instance, through a partnership with the state Department of Children and Families and the Department of Labor, Connecticut targets funding to child welfare and juvenile justice youth for summer and year-round work readiness training and subsidized employment.

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[5]Due to the initial effectiveness of the model for boys, the PACT intervention is being expanded to include teenage girls.

Integrated mental and behavioral health approaches designed to tackle the impact of trauma

Young black men are more likely to experience chronic exposure to trauma, which affects adolescent development and can lead to behavior problems and poor academic performance, than their white counterparts. They are also more likely to be exposed to gun violence as victims or perpetrators.[xvii] Moreover, they are more likely to be exposed to toxic stress from extreme poverty, neglect, or abuse. All of these things can interrupt normal brain development and have long-term consequences for learning, behavior, and physical and mental health.[xviii] Research suggests it is best for practitioners to employ trauma-informed approaches when working with young black males that have directly or indirectly experienced acts of violence or have suffered from living in chaotic communities. Trauma theory proposes that we not view those who have experienced psychological trauma as either "sick" or deficient in moral character, but rather "injured" and in need of healing. Trauma-informed prevention activities ensure that young black men are not re-traumatized. The approach also recognizes that their experiences may have a negative impact on their behaviors, attitudes, and outlook on education and work. Promising strategies are underway in C2C communities to address these issues.

For example:

• Comprehensive Neighborhood Interventions: The Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention awarded two different grants to Philadelphia: an invitation to join the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention and the Community Based Violence Prevention Demonstration Program.[xix] The Forum is a network of communities and federal agencies that share information and build local capacity to prevent and reduce youth violence. It uses a saturation model designed to implement comprehensive trauma-informed interventions in a specific geographic area with disproportionate levels of youth violence. The proposed strategy will focus on five components:

prevention, intervention, reentry, enforcement, and data and evaluation. Supported by the U.S. Department of Justice, the Community-Based Violence Prevention Demonstration Program grant provides $1.5 million, over three years, to cities to replicate successful models and programs. The City of Philadelphia and its partners will use this grant to reduce shootings and homicides by partnering with Temple University to help expand the Philadelphia CeaseFire program. Both grants are targeted where the need is greatest: within neighborhoods plagued with shootings and homicides, with the goal of reducing violence among 14-24 year olds, who are predominately African American males.

• Integrating Mental Health Services into Employment and Training: The Baltimore Youth Opportunity System, in partnership with Johns Hopkins University[xx], has implemented an integrated mental health screening model focused on anxiety and depression. The approach employs several strategies designed to destigmatize mental health issues, including identifying needed mental health services through an initial screening in which all youth participate, educating and training staff on mental health awareness, integrating psycho-educational activities into program delivery and services, and providing treatment sessions and services from a licensed, on-site mental health clinician and/or psychiatrist or referrals to appropriate services. A similar approach is used in the Los Angeles Youth Opportunity System.

Targeting Funding to Out-of-School Populations

Being invested in black male achievement requires meeting young men where they are and actively designing approaches that will improve their academic capability, employability and overall wellbeing. Communities have advanced a set of strategies to target and reach the high volume of young black men who, through no fault of their own, find themselves: disconnected from traditional school; not in the workforce; or involved with the child welfare, criminal justice, or probation systems.

In order to stop young men from falling through the cracks, cross-systems approaches that rely on strong integration of funding, practice, and service delivery are critical. There are several illustrations of cross-systems approaches and integrated service delivery in the C2C communities.

The following are select examples of integrated approaches targeted to out-of-school youth:

• Innovative Industry Partnerships: In partnership with the Hartford Jobs Funnel, Capital Workforce Partners implemented pilot projects to help low-skilled young adults and African American and Latino males gain academic skills and industry-recognized credentials and employment within the construction trade[xxi.] The pilot's primary goal was to improve employment outcomes for young men with limited education and work histories and criminal backgrounds. Initial results are very promising and will inform workforce strategies moving forward.

• Place-based System of Supports: The E[3] (Education, Employment, and Empowerment) Center model in Philadelphia is a neighborhood-based, holistic ap- proach to preparing out-of-school youth and youth returning from juvenile placement (generally aged 16- 21; the majority of whom are young men of color) to achieve long-term educational, career and personal goals, including progress towards self-sufficiency. The E[3] Center model is an essential component of Philadelphia's strategy to improve outcomes for out- of-school youth. By focusing squarely on the needs of dropouts and/or youth returning from delinquent

placement, E[3] Centers continue to play a vital role in providing a community-based education and train- ing intervention for the young people who most need them. Initially established as part of the federal Youth Opportunity Grant initiative in 2000, the E[3] Center model has not only been sustained over the last dozen years, but also has expanded from the original three sites to four locations.

"Every once in a while, everyone needs to talk to that perfect stranger who can help you deal with everything going on in your life."

- Youth Focus Group Participant

"Robert and Deborah[6] were able to proselytize the relationship between dropouts and education to the general public…You knew that African American males were on the bottom…You also knew who was on probation, in foster care, and homeless. They're all interrelated. That began from my perspective and then the Council's perspective a way to begin the discussion about what do we need to do?"

David Crippens, Chair, Los Angeles Youth Council, Workforce Investment Board

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[6] Robert Sainz is the Assistant General Manager, Economic & Workforce Development Department, City of Los Angeles and Debra Duardo is the Executive Director of Health and Human Services for Los Angeles Unified School District.

- Cross-systems Collaboration: As part of the Independent Living Skills/Workforce Investment Act (ILS/WA) program, the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Department and San Diego Workforce Partnership partnered to support an integrated service delivery model for current and former foster and probation youth, providing them with intensive case management, including housing, education, and life skills services. They also provided support on work readiness and skills training and helped youth transition to employment, as well as postsecondary and vocational institutions.

Key Markers of Success

Each stakeholder group—Community Leaders, Youth Advocates/Case Managers, and Youth—shared the same aspirational goal: helping young black men to reach their full potential. However, the strategies to reach that goal and evidence of progress varied.

What constitutes a successful delivery system?

Community leaders, providers, and administrators identified several success markers, including:

- Ability to promote new policies and remove barriers that hinder cross-systems coordination;

- Ability to repurpose existing public funding and attract new public and private resources;

- Building the capacity of providers to integrate new approaches and restructure interventions that include pathways to postsecondary attainment;

- Setting community-wide goals with broad support from influential stakeholders, including residents, parents, youth, community-based organizations, and elected officials;

- Changing the perspectives of employers about the importance of youth employment and work experiences and seeing increased involvement over time;

- Seeing a focus on disconnected youth and out-of-school youth within broader, city-wide education, workforce, and youth development initiatives; and

- Having networks of practitioners and/or established communities of practice designed to facilitate peer learning and improve staff and program quality.

What constitutes success for the young men?

Staff Perspectives: According to staff, success is defined by their ability to help young black men achieve the goals they set for themselves. A majority of the interviewed staff identified a set of common stages that demonstrate youth participants' progress toward their education and employment goals.

First, it was critical that young black men improve their sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. Growth in these areas can be marked by young men showing up on time, having consistent attendance, and being seen as important members of the class or workplace.

Second, after young men have begun that vital shift in thinking, staff can more deeply engage them in job training, career development, and workforce readiness. Indicators of success include passing a GED practice exam; obtaining a GED; getting and keeping a job over a significant period of time; completing training courses and earning credentials associated with youth's interests and skills; and being accepted to and remaining in college.
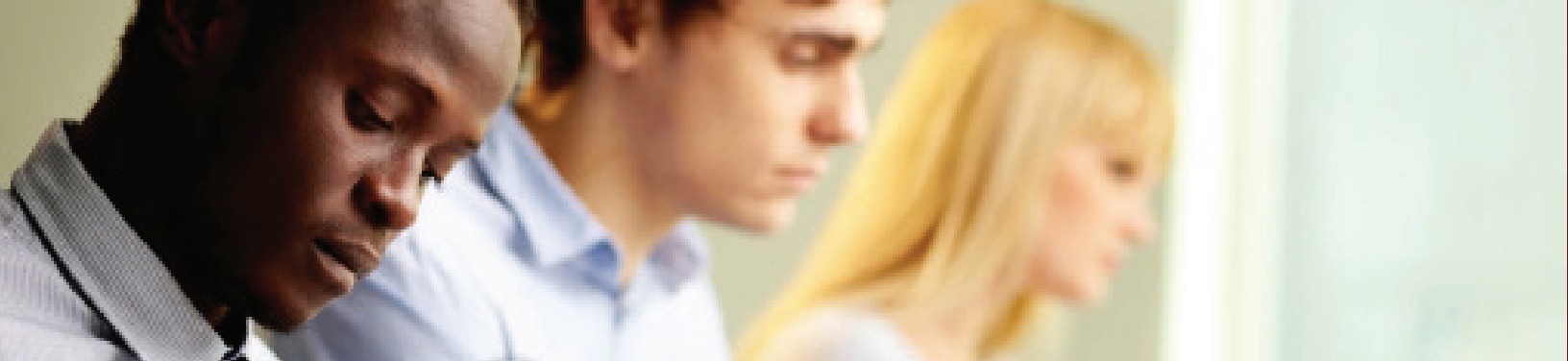
Other markers pivotal to staff in determining if a young man was staying on track and progressing in the program include:

• Reconnecting with family, especially for young men who had been incarcerated. These family members were essential in helping young men build their self-worth and accomplish their goals.

• Visible behavioral changes, such as reducing or eliminating drug and alcohol use.

• Improved interactions with peers and adults, especially in the program.

• Completing probation terms, not being arrested, and staying clear of the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

Youth Perspectives: Young men reported gaining a more positive outlook on their future. They began arriving on time and being accountable to themselves, their peers, and program staff. A majority of youth focus group participants identified earning a high school diploma or GED as a primary goal.

Other definitions of success included having consistent employment, staying out of jail, and attending college or technical school. Further, youth expressed strong desires for:

• "Crossing the stage" (Attending a graduation ceremony);

• Graduating with good grades;

• Gaining work experience;

• Finishing with a well-paying job;

• "Being stable" (having consistent employment and housing); and

• Eliminating negative daily behaviors, including *"getting high and smoking weed"* and *"hanging out with my homies."*

Antoine is a 23-year-old from Los Angeles, California.

Antoine was expelled from high school due to fighting and vandalism. *"I wasn't going anywhere with my life… At first I didn't want to try[this program], but I decided to do it because my friend [who told me about it] was doing so well—having fun and improving academically. He convinced me to go to school, and that was the best decision I could have made. I was exposed to different opportunities and experiences that changed the way I looked at the world. Two years of job training, and then I earned my high school diploma. Once I finished, my caseworkers asked me what I wanted to do next, and that was the first time I thought about going to college. I've always had an interest in the environment and my caseworkers helped me connect that interest to a career. I now know that I want to be an environmental analyst."*

"In order to leverage resources and bring the necessary support to communities experiencing youth violence, it is important to know what assets exist. This information coupled with input from the community (including youth) about what youth need to thrive and succeed will determine the gaps in programs and services. This will allow for the creation of a targeted and coordinated response involving youth-serving systems, community-based organizations and philanthropy to address the needs of youth and communities."

Ian Gordon, Director, San Diego Youth Development Office, San Diego, CA

Serving Young Black Males: The Data Snapshot

CLASP asked the communities in this project to provide demographic and outcome information on black males served in the one year period between October 1, 2011 and September 30, 2012. There was a total of 1661 enrollments, 661 (44%) were out-of-school youth.[7] The communities made important progress in advancing their black male participants who face significant barriers to successful academic and labor market outcomes. An analysis of the available data revealed that communities are:

- Achieving positive education and employment outcomes for the hardest-to-serve young men, including those without a high school diploma and those involved with the criminal justice system.

- Establishing flexible infrastructure and service delivery models, where youth participants come in and out of a various programs over time. In some cases, enrollment dates went as far back as 2007 and 2008.

- Engaging in long-term interventions designed to keep young men connected through and beyond initial attainment of an occupational or secondary credential.

- Serving a broad spectrum of young men with reading levels ranging from below seventh grade to above ninth grade.
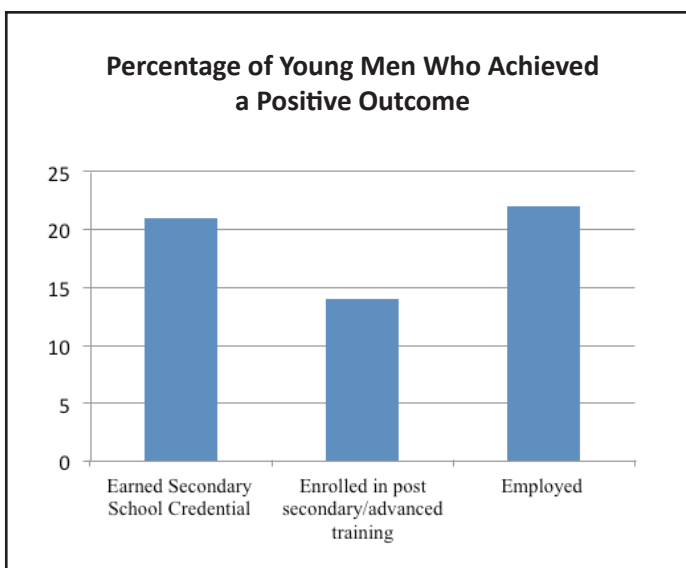
Profile of the Young Men Served

- Ages ranged from 16 to 23, with 20.5 being the average age served across the communities.

- Most were referred by probation, courts, or schools. Others were walk-ins or found out about the program through word of mouth.

- A substantial number were high school dropouts, with 44 percent not having a high school diploma.

- On average, those who dropped out did so midway through tenth grade.

- A significant number were fathers, many had some involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice systems.

- Nearly all were unemployed, lacked work experience, and faced significant barriers to employment at the time of enrollment.

Achieving Positive Education and Employment Outcomes

The communities collectively served 1,661 young men. Of those served, over half achieved a positive outcome: 21 percent earned a secondary credential (high school diploma or GED); 14 percent were enrolled in postsecondary or advanced training; and 22 percent were employed.

Percentage of Young Men Who Achieved a Positive Outcome

Moving Young Black Men Who Dropped Out of High School Toward Credentials and Work

The communities have also been effective in breaking down multiple barriers for the hardest-to-reach young men—most notably high school dropouts, who were helped to earning credentials and obtain employment and work experience. Of the total number served, 44 percent were high school dropouts at the time of enrollment. And of those who were dropouts, 28 percent had been court-involved.
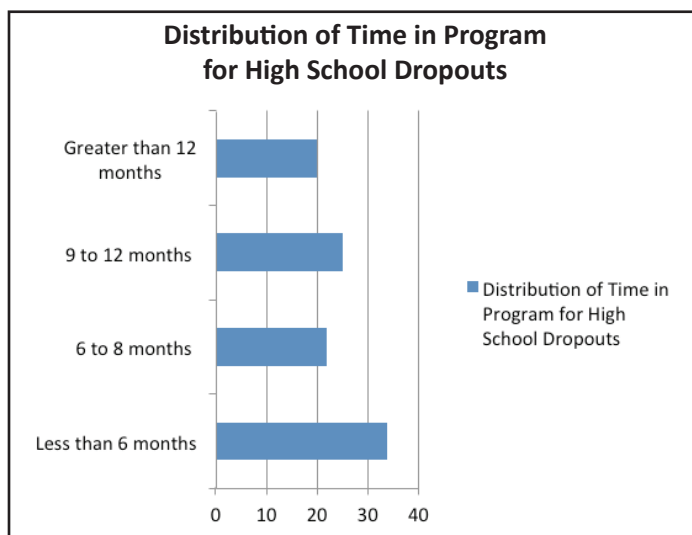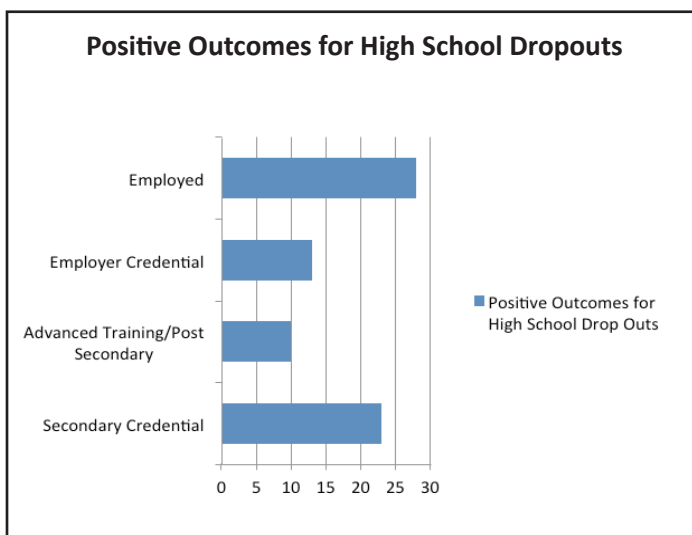
Young men classified as high school dropouts at the time of enrollment achieved significant academic and employment gains.

• 23 percent earned a secondary school credential (high school diploma or GED);

• 10 percent completed postsecondary or advanced training;

• 13 percent earned an employer credential;

• 28 percent obtained employment; and

• Of those who were court-involved, the positive outcome rate was 40 percent.

Dosage and Duration: High School Dropouts

The length of time it took for the young men to achieve outcomes varied greatly and was largely dependent on the diversity of the programs and interventions with which the young men were engaged. For example, we found that young men were more likely to participate in multiple interventions—such as work-readiness training, GED preparation and instruction, and occupational skills training—rather than one discrete intervention. Additionally, the majority of participants moved in and out of the programs and interventions, receiving assistance and gaining skills over a long period of time.

Staff played a critical role in keeping young men engaged—both when they fell off-track and accumulated absences and when they achieved successful outcomes—pushing them to do more and gain additional skills. About one-fifth of young men participated in programs for over one year. Many were engaged in long-term interventions and alternative models to earning a diploma and secondary credentials, such as Hartford Opportunity High School, which targets over-age and under-credited students, and Philadelphia's GED to College Program.

Positive Outcomes for High School Dropouts

Distribution of Time in Program for High School Dropouts

Many of the youth programs, because of pressure associated with performance accountability, often gravitate to serving youth at the higher end of the skill spectrum, but these communities are working across all reading levels and having success. Based on available reading scores, we found that communities are serving a broad spectrum of young black men.

Distribution of Participants by Reading Level
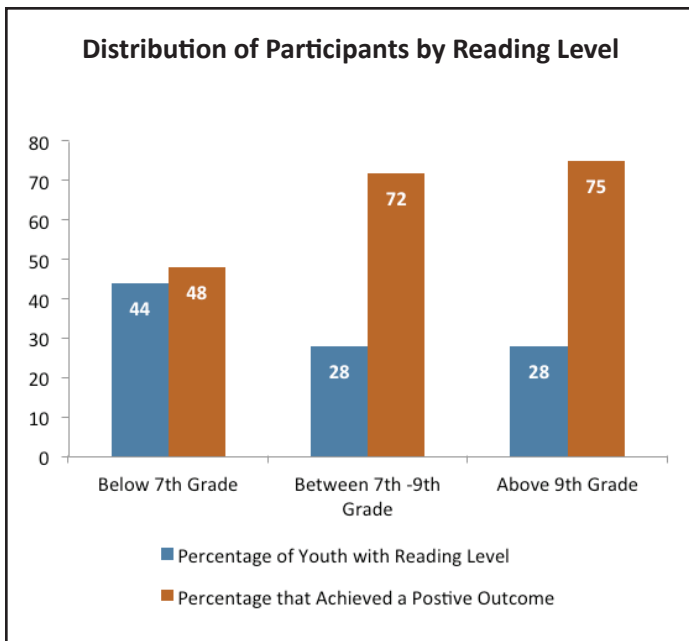
These outcomes reveal that in spite of the challenges the young men faced, communities can help change the course of their lives through leadership; policy and practice innovation; strong systems and interventions; and quality staff. The data suggest intensive and long-term involvement, combined with substantial occupational training and attainment of trade and technical skills and credentials, was an effective strategy for moving young men toward self-sufficiency.

Improving Employment Outcomes for Black Male Youth

Through this work, we have concluded there are four key elements to improving employment outcomes for black male youth.

Create a Sustainable System of Workforce Services Targeted to Black Male Issues

In each of the five communities, the youth workforce system efforts were purposefully focused on areas and populations where black males are disproportionately affected: out-of-school youth, juvenile justice, child welfare, trauma, etc. From work exposure and entry-level jobs to career pathways programs, communities developed a menu of options that allowed them to respond to the emerging work opportunities for which young men were prepared. At the front end, communities spent substantial time engaging young men in job readiness activities and building their career competence, so that regardless of education level and work exposure, they would have the experience and know-how to navigate and perform in the workplace. This foundation is critical for young men who have little to no experience in work settings. A mix of traditional and non-traditional employment strategies were utilized to achieve maximum results for both employers and youth:

- Work experience: provides opportunity for youth to work in the public or private sectors, generally for wages or a stipend, in environments that will develop their employability skills, and in many cases, on projects that provide a community service or benefit; paid and unpaid internships, all designed to expose young people to careers, professional environments, and the world of work. For example, in Los Angeles, youth are provided paid and unpaid internships, skills and work-readiness training designed to connect them to jobs[xxii], through its network of thirteen Youth Source Centers, including the Brotherhood Crusade in South Los Angeles, one of the lead organizations

of the California Community Foundation's Building a Lifetime of Options and Opportunities for Men (BLOOM) Initiative[8].

- Tryout employment: Entry-level work experiences are provided to young people who would not usually be hired because they lack good work behaviors, attitudes, or skills or because they face other barriers to employment. Time frames are negotiated with the employers and the workforce system. This strategy may include hourly wages or a stipend. The Mayor's Office of Employment and Development through YO! Baltimore (YO!) has implemented the *Try Out Employment Internship Program.* YO! pays the wages of youth ages 16 to 22 who have completed a job readiness program for 25 hours each week for up to three months. The goal is for participating employers to provide on-the-job training during the three month training period and then hire the intern at a comparable industry wage on their payroll.

> *"I don't want a steady job; I want a career. To me, a career is something you enjoy and you're making a certain amount of money and you're able to pay your bills and provide for your family. A job is just going somewhere to get a paycheck. I want to do something that I enjoy."*
>
> *- Youth Focus Group Participant*

- Subsidized employment: This includes a range of employment positions in either the public or private sector with earnings being provided by an employer who receives a subsidy for creating and maintaining the employment position, which can be a short or long-term placement and reimbursement for the wages. In San Diego, SWP required that pathways be aligned with local thriving industry sectors to increase the probabilities of subsidized internships and work experience opportunities resulting in viable employment opportunities.

- Summer jobs: The role of summer jobs and broad summer youth employment appeals by elected officials was cited as a primary vehicle to incentivize employer engagement. Recognizing that a short-term, six-to-eight week summer work experience is not sufficient for older youth and young adults who are reengaging in their education and may have greater financial burdens than their younger counterparts, leaders in each community acknowledged the important impact a summer jobs campaign can have in establishing the necessary relationships with larger businesses and corporations to create year-round employment options for youth. Summer jobs appeals by Mayors and other highly recognized community leaders help convince corporations to invest in their future workforce. The five communities in this project are invested in robust summer jobs campaigns, with direct appeals being made from elected leaders to the business community. In most cases, summer youth employment is funded by a combination of local, state, and private investments.

- Small business engagement: Communities reported having strong relationships with small businesses, which often see the immediate benefits of relationships with youth-serving organizations and young men themselves. Young people cited "owning their own business" and "being an entrepreneur" as aspirations, and being employed by a small business owner not only allows them to learn specific skills associated with a particular industry or trade, but provides exposure to the skills required to start, own, and operate a small business. This skill set is especially important to young black men who may face hurdles to traditional employment because of their past involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice systems.

Other commonly used strategies include:

- On-the-Job Training (OJT): In the public or private sector, training is provided to a paid employee while he or she is engaged in productive work that provides knowledge and skills essential to adequate performance on the job. Public funds are used to sub-

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[8]The BLOOM Initiative is focused on the employment, education, and mentoring of black male youth ages 14-18 who have had contact with the L.A. County probation system.

sidize a portion of the wages during the negotiated period of training. The expectation is that the employer will hire participants as regular employees without receiving a subsidy after training is completed.

- Customized training: This strategy implemented by businesses or qualified training institutions is designed to provide participants with specialized skills training for available employment positions and assist businesses in training and hiring new workers.

- Transitional jobs: Transitional jobs is an employment strategy that seeks to support individuals with employment barriers into work using wage-paid, short-term employment that combines real work, skill development and supportive services. They are also referred to as public service jobs, community service jobs, and publicly funded employment.[ii]

Build Social Networks

Social access and exposure to work play major roles in the ability of minority youth to get a job. Job access for urban minority youth is less defined by proximity to the worksite as it is by social isolation and the lack of broad social networks.[xxiv] The programs and interventions implemented in the five communities were designed to help young men gain access to employers and work opportunities that would ordinarily be closed to them. Program data from the communities suggests that this can be accomplished by helping young men attain employer-recognized credentials. For example, in Philadelphia through PYN's occupational skills training year-round

programs that support out-of-school youth, participants are provided contextualized academic and vocational training in high-growth industries leading to employer-recognized credentials.[xxv] But credentials alone don't secure employment or ensure entry into a career. Lack of work experience and references were cited by young men in focus groups as chief barriers to getting a job. One young man involved in an education, employment, and training program in Los Angeles described his unsuccessful experience in trying to find employment on his own, after having earned his certificate in fork lifting, and prior to joining the program. He reported that there were many job openings in the Los Angeles area in the warehouse industry and, after speaking to a hiring manager, he went in for an interview. But when he arrived, the hiring manager said they no longer needed anyone. The young man attributed this experience to his race and not having someone to vouch for him. Another young man shared that training for employers would go a long way toward securing employment, remarking: *"Employers need to take the time to get to know the candidate as a person and not as [a] criminal."*

At the systems and program level, administrators and staff broker relationships with employers, develop strategies that essentially "buy" access for young men to enter employment and gain work experience, and provide assurances that the young men are adequately prepared and trained for the workplace. The local youth workforce system has a vital role in engaging employers and making the case for youth investments and partnerships. They help create a culture of business involvement in youth employment and education. At the programmatic

level, beyond providing job readiness training and ensuring youth have the skills they need for work, they initiate interactions with employers, gather information on their specific job needs, and provide a match service identifying eligible youth for job openings. For instance, one job developer in Philadelphia reported having dozens of personal relationships with hiring managers at the International Airport. Another in Hartford discussed his relationships with human resource managers in local banks and corporate headquarters for specific industries. Their strategy, not unlike a youth development specialist in Los Angeles, is *employing one young man at a time.* They all cited their credibility and the integrity of the organization as assets. Trust built over time with employers who have positive experiences with youth helps give young men a chance.

Provide Supportive Adults Who Understand Black Males

Ask any administrator in the youth field or any youth in these programs and they will all acknowledge that the success or failure of young people depends on the caliber of the youth workers (sometimes called advocates, youth development specialists, or case managers). The role of dedicated, committed, and well-trained caring adults working with young people is often cited as one of the primary indicators of a quality youth program.[xxvi] Research has consistently emphasized the significance of giving young people, across all racial and ethnic groups, supportive environments and relationships to help guide them into adulthood.[xxvii] These relationships are especially influential for black males, who are less likely to have support structures and relationships that would facilitate a positive transition to adult expectations and experiences.[xxviii]

It takes a team of committed adult staff to lift up, build, and lead these young men toward realizing their promise. The staff interviewed revealed a deep sense of obligation to the young men above and beyond what was required of them in their position. Across the programs, staff averaged sixty cases on average, yet somehow managed to provide an individual touch to each participant. No matter what their specific position—from youth development specialist (advocate, case manager), job developer, education specialist, recruiter, or GED instructor— staff were deeply invested in the success and outcomes of the young person. Staff described how they routinely "swapped" youth in their assigned caseload based on what the young man may have needed that particular day. For example, if a young man was dealing with a home or life issue that required a male perspective or an established rapport, a staff member not assigned to work with the young man would still help him resolve his issue.

> *"The young men require an intensive level of service that deals with all of their needs. They come to us without basic skills and lack support. They need many positive adults and role models."*
>
> *Case Manager, Philadelphia*

> *"We try to get a mix of staff that is culturally competent and diverse, that comes from the neighborhood. We serve about 85 percent African American and Latino youth—the majority are males—[and] I want there to be a commitment to North County, an understanding of what's happening in North County, and what issues are happening in regards to gangs…"*
>
> *Community Advocate, San Diego County, CA*

Across the various positions, the following are primary characteristics we observed of the staff working with young black men:

- The staff interviewed spanned age groups and genders. A majority were either black or Latino.

- Nine years was the average length of time staff reported working in the youth development field or other settings with youth. And a substantial number indicated that they had been with the same program or organization the whole time, having held different positions through the years.

- Many were trained teachers, counselors, and social workers. But a significant number of staff began their careers as youth workers, gaining significant experience holding a variety of positions in youth programs.

- The majority of staff reported being from the city in which they worked and were from similar neighborhoods and backgrounds as the young men they were serving.

There is no magic formula or recipe to help young men to navigate their daily lives and continue on a path towards self-improvement, education advancement, and employability. However, there were clear characteristics that became apparent as they described their work and interactions with youth. They wore bright expressions whenever describing a young man who had "made it," and tears and blank stares lingered when sharing the story of one who hadn't. Too often, those stories ended in a young man's death or his incarceration. This work is literally a matter of life and death for them.

When asked about his experience working with young black men, a staff person in Baltimore said, *"Ultimately, we are charged with preparing productive, taxpayer citizens. I use the three Es. Educate: beyond basic education to postsecondary, college, training and military. Employ: getting them on a career track and earning wages to support themselves and their families. Establish: seeding the idea of a long-term vision for their lives and supporting lifelong goals."*

Staff overwhelming supported a holistic approach that reaches both "head and heart" and said they would do whatever it takes to keep youth engaged. They identified several traits that made them effective in reaching and keeping young men attached, including:

- Being consistent;
- Being truthful;
- Having high, but realistic expectations;
- Sharing personal and relatable experiences;
- Providing structure and ensuring young men have very little idle time;
- Working with young men individually and in small groups, being flexible with services;
- Coordinating across all the systems and organizations that come in contact with young men;
- Having an approachable office setting;
- Building trust with young men and their families when possible; and
- Being willing and able to meet the young man where he is, including visiting his home or neighborhood hangout.

Arguably one of the most significant contributions of youth workers to the transformation of young black men has to do with how they work with and support those who are on probation or are court-involved. When working with court-involved youth, the staff reported having an all-hands-on-deck approach to ensure the young men adhered to their probation requirements. This included following up and establishing a relationship with probation and court staff about young men's progress in the program, attending court appointments with them, and having a safe and constructive place for them to go beyond class or work hours, such as the youth center or staff office. A significant part of their role was just being someone who could vouch for them. Some of the young men had strong family and friend connections, but many did not. Having the support of staff helped to legitimize

their progress and transformation and was equally as important as efforts to improve their skill and employability. Without successfully satisfying their terms of probation, these young men would be recycled continuously through the criminal justice system.

Notwithstanding the youth workers' dedication, they reported facing a number of challenges to getting their work done, most of which stemmed from their limited capacity to address young men's sundry challenges, including: assisting with their housing needs; finding child care and food resources; working with probation staff who were less familiar with positive youth development approaches; and having adequate funding to help provide transportation.

> *"They play a lot of roles – mentor, second parent, tutor, guidance counselor. You can't really categorize them as one specific title. If it weren't for my advisor, I wouldn't have my GED. I wasn't even trying to get my diploma; I was just coming here so my mom would get off my back. He was calling me up on weekends, like are you going to be in school on Monday?"*
>
> *- Youth Focus Group Participant*

Restore Young Black Males to Place of Resilience and Hope

For the most part, the young men who participated in the focus groups had no other alternative—no other place to go—and the programs they were part of provided a fresh start. The young men became engaged in the programs and interventions through a variety of entry points. The majority were referred by the juvenile or criminal justice systems or required to enroll in the program as a part of their probation. Others found out about the program either through a family member or word of mouth after being expelled from or falling behind in traditional high school. A small number were walk-ins seeking summer employment or who knew the organization from childhood.

Whether they were pushed out of traditional high schools, remanded by court or probation, or brought in by a parent or family member, they didn't have a vision for their lives in the long-term before getting connected to the program. Moreover they came from schools with low expectations. But we found that, once connected, the young men that many had written off were flourishing.

These were not dead beats just biding their time in the programs; they were teenagers and young adults navigating complex life situations. They acknowledged facing discrimination because of their background, how they looked, or where they lived. They spoke about people being turned off by or afraid of their appearance. Even still, they had a strong sense of personal responsibility for their actions, associations, and what they perceived as obstacles to achieving their goals. *"If I can't put the negative things aside, I'm never going to make it. I'm going to be in and out of jail, in and out of the system, in and out of everything. If I don't change, nothing will change."*

They embodied everything you associate with this age group—humor, style, and curiosity—and defied destructive stereotypes. They were intelligent, eager to learn and work, and great communicators who readily expressed thoughts. They were respectful and driven, with strong visions for their futures. In a word, they were optimistic.

> *"The question is not only: how do we support their academic goals? But how do we also support their life goals? Many of them grow up in hostile environments and we must mentor and help them to understand how to succeed in the college environment and the workplace. A critical first step is to dismantle terminology and be careful what we call them. Language is important."*
>
> *Higher Education Stakeholder, Hartford, CT*

Andrew is 22-years-old and is from Baltimore, Maryland.

"I grew up with both my mom and my dad in my life. Even as a kid, school was really hard for me; I never liked it. My parents were really strict and I started rebelling against them once I entered middle school. I smoked my first blunt in seventh grade and it was basically all downhill from there. I started hanging with a gang and doing all of the wrong things. I was basically socially promoted through the ninth grade. In 10th grade, I changed high schools and it was a difficult transition. The new school was full of teachers and students that I didn't know, and all of the courses were so fast paced [that] I just couldn't keep up, so I dropped out.

My mom signed me up for YO! Baltimore when I was 16 because she wanted me to get my diploma. So I started taking the classes I needed to earn my high school diploma. Within my first year in the program, I got a job working on a construction site. This was my first real work experience and I learned a lot about what it meant to be on time, follow directions, and make money. The next year, I worked at a restaurant, and the year after that I worked with kids in an afterschool program. I had a real connection with the kids at the school, especially the boys. I could talk them down from a fight and they would come to me to talk about their problems, and when I told them to get out of the hallways and go to class, they did! No matter how bad my life got, I always knew I had a passion for kids and this job proved it.

Now I work as a student support staff at a local high school and I coach youth football in the evening. In a year, I hope to join the school police and maybe be the chief of police one day. But the ultimate success for me is always remaining part of YO! Baltimore so that I can be a mentor and inspiration to the generations behind me."

End Notes

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