

American Youth Policy Forum Presentation

Written and presented by Joe McLaughlin
Director, Court Employment Project
CASES

Good afternoon. I would like to thank AYPF for the opportunity to speak to you today about CASES' experience working with justice-involved youth. My goal is to share with you our experiences and try to identify what we have found to be the most important characteristics of effective programs for court-involved young people.

The Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services, more commonly known as CASES, was originally established in 1989 with the merger of two former Vera Institute of Justice pilot projects - the Community Service Sentencing Project and the Court Employment Project. Since then, it has expanded and now includes programs for adult mentally ill offenders, technical parole violators, and repeat misdemeanor offenders.

I am the Director of the Court Employment Project (CEP), the oldest and largest of CASES programs. CEP provides alternative sentencing options for over 400 young felony offenders. All Court Employment Project participants are assessed to determine strengths, interests and needs. This information is used to develop individualized program plans, and participants' attendance and adherence to that plan is reported to the intake judges on a regular basis. Participants who successfully complete 6 months of CEP typically receive 5 years of Probation and youthful offender status.

I will be speaking to you today about the Career Exploration Project (CXP), one of the programs operated within CEP. All CEP participants are eligible to apply for acceptance into CXP. CEP also offers art therapy and education, social work, substance abuse services, education advocacy and instruction, mentoring, adventure-based activities and case management services.

Years ago, when I was running the employment unit at CASES, a young man came to my office virtually everyday asking - actually more like begging - for a job. He did not care what the job was but he claimed he desperately needed to work and would do anything. Eventually, I referred him for a stock position at a large toy store. I saw him several days later and he was beaming, thanking me for helping him find a job. Several days later, I noticed him sitting dejectedly with his head down. I approached him and he told me that he had quit. This shocked me - he had appeared almost ecstatic only a few days earlier. His rationale for quitting was that he was not going to allow himself to be disrespected. He explained that his supervisor had told him to sweep and mop a floor. In his mind, this was a sign of disrespect since he had been hired to do stock work. This is a true story that I use to illustrate the kinds of attitudes about work and lack of basic employment skills that many of our young people have.

Developing effective programs for justice involved youth requires thinking carefully about the young people to be served – their circumstances, attitudes toward work, prior employment experience and education levels. CXP evolved from a recognition and understanding of the wide range of specific obstacles our young people faced and a

realization that, for us to be successful, we needed to develop a program that addressed all of these issues in meaningful and practical ways. Our goal was to develop a comprehensive program that would help these young people develop realistic attitudes and expectations about work, better understand the connection between education and employment, begin to develop personal references and support systems and gain valuable experience working in jobs they would not likely access on their own.

CXP began in 1997, initially consisting of one coordinator serving 45 clients per year. Today the program consists of 3 coordinators and a graduate assistant and serves 120 young people annually. All CEP participants - young people who have been charged with felonies and are facing jail or prison - are eligible to apply for the CXP. Once accepted, participants must attend school regularly and complete a 16-session class that prepares them to interview for pre-screened paid internships, and helps provide them with the basic knowledge and skills needed to complete the internship.

The training focuses on helping young people gain the confidence and skills needed to interview and obtain employment. The topics covered include communication and problem solving skills, financial literacy and understanding what is and is not appropriate in the workplace. An example of an exercise included in the training curriculum, is that all participants are assigned general topics such as gang involvement, youth violence, public education and the death penalty and asked to prepare a 5 to 10 minute presentation on some aspect of the topic. They are given time to research the topic and prepare a 5 to 10 minute presentation which they present in front of their classmates and, usually anywhere from 10 to 20 CASES staff. Following each presentation, they respond to questions and comments from the audience. While, for many, this is often extremely intimidating, we have found it to be a practical and effective technique to help participants gain confidence and improve communication skills. Once hired, participants attend a weekly meeting, facilitated by the CXP coordinator, to discuss their experiences in the workplace.

We are very frank with potential employers that, although we have raised the funds to pay participants' stipends for 18-20 hours per week and have put the young people through a comprehensive program to prepare them, it is likely that issues will arise with the interns from time to time. Unless these issues rise to a level that requires termination or suspension, we expect the employers to continue working with the young people and the CXP staff to use these situations as "teaching moments" or opportunities to learn while on the job. This has been a very effective approach in helping young people develop more realistic understanding about work and appropriate behavior in the workplace.

Because CASES offers an extensive array of services both on-site and through relationships with other programs and providers throughout NYC, we are able to work with and support the multiple needs of our young people. Recently, we became an official GED testing site and this has been a huge motivating factor for many of our young people. CXP staff are able to connect participants to counseling, substance abuse, art therapy and social work services as well as an array of activities and trips designed to introduce young people to new, exciting and interesting experiences ranging from skiing, mountain biking, rock climbing, visiting museums, and college trips. These

experiences help participants think more broadly about what they can realistically accomplish. Often, when they begin our program, their views about their prospects for the future are limited and narrow, all too often influenced by their experiences hanging out on their corner or in their projects and what they see happening to and with their peers in their neighborhoods. I believe that helping participants think more broadly about what they are capable of accomplishing is a crucial concept that is too often overlooked.

Another unique aspect of this program is our approach in working with alumni. Historically, CASES has had difficulty maintaining contact with program participants once they complete our programs. In the case of CXP, we have built an alumni component into the program design. We reach out to alumni on a quarterly basis and hold several alumni trips and events each year. This puts us in the position to offer and provide needed services to graduates regardless of how long ago they completed our program.

More than 70% of 2006 participants completed the one-month training class and approximately half of the participants who began the training class completed both the training and the internship. Quarterly outreach to alums in 2006 shows that commitment to education remains high, 85% of the alums contacted last year continued their education: 22% began college, and 39% completed their GED or received their high school diploma. Most impressive, I believe, is the fact that less than 5% of CXP alumni are convicted of a new felony within two years of leaving CASES, which is even lower than the felony reconviction rate of CEP graduates, which is 12% after two years.

When the first coordinator of the program left CASES, I called some of the older alumni to invite them to an event congratulating and thanking her for her enormous contributions to the success of this program. I arranged to meet with one young man, who had graduated from the very first cycle and had worked closely with CXP for several years following his graduation. He now has his own business as a personal trainer with a client base of over 100 clients who pay him \$80 per hour to design and oversee their exercise routines. He is married with two children and living in a nice apartment in a great neighborhood. He showed me pictures of his wife and children and spoke proudly of his oldest daughter who is attending private school and plays soccer on the weekends. Besides making me feel even older than I am, it was a poignant reminder of what young people are capable of accomplishing when they are given real opportunities and are provided with the support and guidance they need to achieve self-sufficiency.

I applaud efforts I have observed in some federal RFP's to encourage collaboration with other agencies and programs, as I have found this to be a very effective way to provide additional services to young people. I also think the trend towards performance-based contracting can be enormously helpful to organizations such as CASES which, due to the frenetic nature of our work, might not otherwise place the same priority on collecting information. I think it is important that, besides satisfying reporting requirements, the information can also be helpful to organizations and used to inform program decisions. I believe this creates incentives for organizations to allocate sufficient time and resources needed to collect accurate and timely information.

My message is simple – it is absolutely possible to effectively intervene with court-involved youth, and CXP is just one example. I would urge you to think carefully when you are considering voting to appropriate funds for at-risk and justice-involved youth, about the issues I have described as crucial to effective programming – providing comprehensive training and support, challenging employment experiences, and support systems that meet the multiple needs of the clients served. Our success in programs such as CXP is the result of our ability to raise the funds needed to work intensively with small groups of participants. It has been our experience at CASES that many of the federal funding streams require programs to serve large numbers of clients without also providing the level of funding needed to maintain the intensity and diversity of programming we believe is necessary to produce impressive outcomes. Often, there is one key outcome that these proposals look for, such as maintaining steady employment. But, since we serve school-aged youth, focusing on that outcome exclusively may actually hinder our efforts to encourage and support young peoples' educational involvement, and actually hurt their prospects for gaining meaningful, long-term employment. I would urge that, to the extent you can influence the content and structure of federal RFP's providing funding for youth programs, that you structure them in ways that allow programs the flexibility to respond based on the unique factors of the populations they serve – factors that programs know best - and the characteristics unique to the communities being served.

Many of the young people we serve are products of a public education system that has failed to adequately educate and prepare these young people for the journey towards self-sufficiency. I cannot speak directly about how this relates to No Child Left Behind but I can tell you with absolute certainty that, as a group, these young people have definitely been left behind. I would urge that, whatever your position or role in government, you do whatever you can to ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to account for this failure. The costs of ignoring this are enormous in both economic and social terms, yet, as my last example indicated, the benefits of preparing a young person to work and deal with life on life's terms are enormous.

Again - thank you for providing me with the opportunity to speak with you today. If, at any time, you feel that CASES could be of assistance in the important work that you do on behalf of young people, please do not hesitate to contact me directly and I will do our absolute best to help.