

Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth

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*Dedicated to Tyrell Govan and Kevin Ortiz,
mentoring program participants who died far too soon.*

TO REACH AND ENGAGE young people has long been the quest of youth justice interventions. We write this paper as strong advocates for credible messenger mentoring— an approach with great promise not only to disrupt the tragic spiral of incarceration and recidivism that traps so many young people but also to strengthen communities disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration.

What is credible messenger mentoring? It is a transformative group mentoring intervention for young adults in the justice system. At its heart, men and women who were themselves justice-involved are hired to engage young people on their own terms in structured and intentional relationships. Transformative mentoring relies on the hiring of credible messengers as paid mentors. Because mentors share — and have overcome — similar experiences, including involvement in the justice system, young people find them trustworthy and far more persuasive than motivational speakers or even the best-intentioned social workers.

Transformative mentoring with credible messengers has been able to successfully reach young people who were disconnected from education and employment and not otherwise inclined to participate in positive youth programming. At its best, it helps young people change their attitudes and behaviors and ultimately go on to become mentors themselves.

Credible messenger mentoring delivers benefits all around.

Young people receive guidance from believable sources, opportunities to form healthy relationships in safe, supportive environments, and tools to replace negative attitudes and behaviors with productive practices and relationships.

Mentors gain opportunities for employment and professional development. They experience a deepening of their personal commitment to transformation and growth.

Group-based mentoring provides an antidote for the burn-out common in social services.

Communities are strengthened by the positive, round the clock presence of mentors and supportive caring peers. Long after program hours, pro-social messages and behaviors are modeled on the street, in parks and all too often at funerals and memorials. Significantly, credible messenger mentoring channels financial resources directly into the pockets of those most impacted by incarceration.

Public safety is enhanced as recidivism declines and young people who are disconnected from education and employment find the hope and support they need to resist the lure of the streets, thrive and help others. Credible messenger mentoring also facilitates the development of strengths-based relationships between staff and clients served by government and social service agencies.

Overview

CREDIBLE MESSENGER MENTORING is an idea whose time is coming. New York City has made striking investments in it for young people who reside in neighborhoods plagued by violence, trauma, gang involvement, substance abuse, poverty, homelessness and chronic illness. At the 2011 launch of the Young Men's Initiative, the New York City Department of Probation (DOP) created Arches Transformative Mentoring, a curriculum-based group mentoring intervention using paid credible messenger mentors.² Preliminary research on Arches indicates a notable 50 percent decrease in felony arrests for those in the program.³ Drawing on this success, the New York City Mayor's Office secured on-going funding for Arches in the City budget and expanded the Arches model into public housing for at-risk youth in a program called "Next Steps." An Arches Alumni Academy for Advancement (4As) operated by Community Connections for Youth trains Arches graduates who are interested in becoming mentors themselves. And a new Institute for Transformative Mentoring at the New School provides structured professional training for credible messengers employed in social service agencies.

Credible messenger mentoring is taking off in other parts of the country as well. San Diego, Chicago and South Carolina are consulting with Community Connections for Youth. Significantly, the District of Columbia Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, D.C.'s cabinet-level juvenile justice agency, made a multi-million dollar investment in credible messenger mentoring for court-involved young people in the District.

In this paper, we seek to explain what credible messenger mentoring is and why it is so effective at engaging some of the most hard to engage youth. We explore its history as a youth justice intervention and review contemporary research. We draw on our experiences and share what we have learned. And we take a closer look at the original Arches model. Our goal is to create a common vocabulary for practitioners, researchers and policymakers and to make clear that credible messenger mentoring is a just, effective and cost-effective approach to youth justice that shows promise for communities large and small.

What is Credible Messenger Mentoring?

CREDIBLE MESSENGER MENTORING is first and foremost a group intervention. Attachment to a pro-social peer group, led by credible messengers, facilitates attitudinal and behavioral change. Well-facilitated groups that challenge criminal and antisocial thinking have a powerful effect on reducing recidivism.⁴ Credible messenger mentoring groups amplify that impact. Not only do young people benefit from having their thinking challenged by trained and trustworthy mentors, they in turn begin to challenge and hold each other accountable. While the majority of group participants have delinquent or criminal backgrounds, the group itself is a pro-social peer support network where youth remind and encourage one another to maintain their commitment to positive behavior.⁵

In the world of court-involved young people, mentors who come from the same communities and have shared similar experiences have an especially powerful role to play. They have a superior ability to connect with youth who are most disconnected and most resistant to traditional programs. They build trust faster and inspire confidence more quickly than other professionals because they have survived the difficulties that young people are up against. They have figured out how to live the life they are urging young people to adopt. Credible messengers — people who are recognized and validated by a community — can spread a message of hope and change to young people who trust them.

The effective credible messenger mentor is much more than a crisis-responder or an inspirational speaker who delivers a stirring message and moves on. They are trained and paid to develop authentic long-term relationships with young people. They stay connected, serving as real and present guides as youth navigate the difficult path of life change. They offer firsthand wisdom about down-to-earth challenges youth face, such as breaking away from a gang or navigating a job search with a felony on your record.

Credible messenger mentors become adept at meeting

youth where they are and skilled in the delivery of their message. Trained in the art of facilitation, mentors learn how to motivate youth by drawing out what is within rather than merely imposing information from without. In a nurturing pro-social environment, they help youth focus on changes in cognition and behavior that precede the ability to make progress in education and employment.

Why It Makes Sense

WHILE CREDIBLE MESSENGER mentoring is not a substitute for education, employment, housing, or substance abuse treatment, investing in it makes good policy sense. Credible messenger mentoring is an important component in a process of growth and healing, providing young people with the motivation to take ownership of their lives and to thrive. It gives young people a mechanism for the accountability and provides the support they need to stick with their individual plans for change. Credible messenger mentoring pays a healthy return on investment in everything from public safety and fiscal saving to strengthened neighborhoods.

New Messengers, New Messages

YOUNG PEOPLE OF COLOR in impoverished communities grow up being bombarded with a dispiriting message: “You are dangerous; you are violent; you are criminal; you are going to wind up dead or in jail.” At times, adults deliver the message explicitly when they accuse young people of being “up to no good.” It is also conveyed in body language when people shrink back in fear or clutch their property tighter when they see a group of young people on the street. Public policy reinforces the theme when schools invest in metal detectors, police officers outnumber guidance counselors, and government spends millions of dollars more on youth incarceration than positive youth development. Peers who have internalized the message drive it home further by championing criminal and antisocial lifestyles. When young people hear this message over and over again, it is no surprise they begin to repeat it to themselves.

Young people ensnared in the justice system often fail to engage with services and opportunities. For many, neither threats of punishment nor appeals to opportunity make an impact. What takes hold is a kind of “institutionalized oppositional culture,” a reaction to a history of prejudice and discrimination that makes meaningful participation in social and civic institutions problematic, if not impossible.⁶ Despite their hopes and dreams, many young people find their aspirations overwhelmed by these negative messages.

Young people desperately need to hear a different message. They need to hear that they were created with purpose, that success remains a possibility, and that they have the power to live with dignity, meaning, and hope. They need to hear that yesterday's mistakes do not have to define tomorrow's opportunities, that there are ways for them to earn money that do not put them at risk of a prison sentence, and that they can experience strength and power without

resorting to violence. Above all, they need to know that it is possible to live a life where they are overcoming their weaknesses, fulfilling their dreams, loving their friends and families, and giving back to their communities. Although they were once defined as the problem, they must come to believe that they can be part of the solution.

Even dedicated youth advocates, justice system stakeholders and social service providers have trouble communicating these messages to young people who are involved in justice systems. The problem is not the *message*; the young person simply has a hard time identifying with the *messenger*. For many young people whose life stories are full of abuse, neglect and punishment, the thought process works like this: “That may work for you. But you have no idea of what it is like to be me or what I face every day. What works in your world just doesn’t work in mine.” The problem is compounded when the messenger — often a well-meaning counselor, teacher or law enforcement officer — is an obvious beneficiary of race, class and educational privileges that the young person has never experienced.

Credible messengers are frequently able to motivate young people where other professionals have tried and failed. They are often the first people that young people turn to when circumstances seem too strange or difficult and are the people capable of conveying that change is indeed necessary and possible. Being credible allows the young person to better hear the mentor’s message. Young people are provided with the motivation, support and accountability they need to take ownership of their lives.

Creating A Positive Social Environment

REPEATED INTERVENTIONS ARE often needed to help young adults give up criminal activity and strengthen their attachment to education, employment and community. Research shows that young people involved in the justice system require ongoing positive community-based supports in order to desist from crime and to thrive.⁷ Few programs today aim to create safe and welcoming spaces for young people disconnected from school and work. These youth do not feel comfortable in many neighborhood programs. Individualized services, even when they are culturally competent and strengths-based, still fail to provide the sense of community and belonging that young people need. Group-based credible messenger mentoring fills that gap.

Transforming attitudes and behaviors is not easy. Daily practice and reinforcement are necessary in order for people to put their best feet forward and continue doing the next right thing. A community of mutual support helps young people break the patterns of behavior — personal, familial and cultural — that hold them back and helps to replace them with alternative practices and relationships. The mentoring process encourages the mentees and the mentors to form and maintain healthy relationships. It is the combination of knowledge and fellowship that holds transformative power. Through group-based credible messenger mentoring, young people learn, many for the first time, how to stay in control of their thinking and actions.

They experience the power of a supportive community and learn to form networks that buttress their own sense of worth and of hope.

Strengthening Mentors and Communities

CREDIBLE MESSENGER MENTORS are not volunteers. They are paid professionals who receive salaries, benefits and training to enhance their professional development. Through mentoring, credible messengers experience a deepening of their own commitment to transformation and growth, personally and professionally. The training mentors receive — in facilitation, cognitive behavioral therapy, positive youth development, restorative practice and more — is foundational and applicable to various career paths. Many participants in the Arches Transformative Mentoring program have gone on to full-time employment in the social service sector. As one mentor noted, “Becoming a mentor is a learning experience. You learn to grow within yourself as you are encouraging others to grow.”⁸

Many youth justice interventions never really take root in high crime neighborhoods because they are carried out largely by staff at institutions external to the communities they serve. Hiring credible messengers living in the same neighborhoods creates the potential for ongoing contact and continuous reinforcement. Mentors serve as brokers to connect young people to pro-social activities, community-minded adults, and informal community supports such as neighborhood associations, faith-based organizations and civic groups. In these settings, community leaders are not just telling young people to stop doing wrong but are developing authentic relationships that provide actual opportunities to do right.

Beyond simply a social service intervention, credible messenger mentoring is good public policy. It addresses the crisis of mass incarceration, especially as it affects low-income communities of color. And used wisely, it strengthens the capacity of communities to rebuild the positive support networks that have been weakened by economic decay and hyper-punitive criminal justice policies.

Transforming Agency Culture

CREDIBLE MESSENGER MENTORING humanizes clients for front-line and managerial staff at government and social service agencies. As agency staff have increasing occasion to interact positively with young people and their mentors, their own capacity for empathy and respect deepens. They come to view the people they are charged to serve and supervise through a strengths-based lens, which has the potential to change the culture of an agency.

Moreover, group-based credible messenger mentoring models provide an antidote to the burnout that is all too common in the social service sector. Confronted by the multiple risk factors in the young people they serve, an individual professional can quickly become overwhelmed by needs ranging from housing, education, and employment to mental health, family crises and substance abuse.

In a group mentoring model, mentors are not expected to “fix” young people, nor are they tasked with meeting every need. Instead, credible messenger mentors create a group framework in which mentees are empowered to find their own solutions. Credible messengers share strategies they have used to overcome similar challenges and encourage youth to stay on the path to transformation. Peers support one another. When the issues facing individual youth seem daunting, purposeful case conferencing among mentors generates practical responses that are collectively decided upon. The more credible messengers work as a team, the less prone they are to burnout. As they consider issues in a group setting, the group itself becomes the engine of support, guidance, and transformation.

Putting Justice Reinvestment Into Practice

AT ITS CORE, credible messenger mentoring is a justice reinvestment strategy. Hiring credible messengers as mentors directs financial resources to the neighborhoods harmed by incarceration and economic devastation. Many justice reinvestment strategies merely recycle money around different law enforcement entities, moving monies from state prisons to county jails or from correction officers to probation officers. At best, justice reinvestment reroutes monies formerly spent on incarceration to deliver social services in highly impacted communities. Rarely does it help remedy the very deficits that cycle people through the justice system. Credible messenger mentoring puts resources directly into the pockets of those most impacted by incarceration.

The Roots of a Transformative idea

THE CONCEPT OF the credible messenger is not new. There are multiple examples demonstrating the power of deploying an individual who has overcome similar challenges to serve as a mentor to one who is currently going through the same struggle. The Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) movement was built on peer-to-peer support among recovering alcoholics.⁹ The Veterans Administration recognized the power of using wounded veterans as outreach and peer support for returning soldiers suffering from life-changing injuries.¹⁰ The mental health and substance abuse fields have increasingly made use of peer navigators to assist individuals in their recovery from addiction and behavioral health challenges.¹¹ In all these instances, assistance from survivors with shared experience is recognized as a valuable service and has grown from its origins as volunteer-based and informal to include professionalized, credentialed positions such as Certified Alcohol and Substance Abuse Counselor (CASAC) and Behavioral Health Peer Navigator.

Similarly, formerly incarcerated community members have mentored young people for decades. The term “OG” for “Original Gangster” is commonly applied to neighborhood elders. Mostly men, some of these OG’s experienced a spiritual or religious transformation while incarcerated and emerged from prison with an evangelist’s zeal to save others.

Malcolm X, who in his autobiography describes this prison awakening, is perhaps the most famous example. Others, like former Black Panther Eddie Ellis were already politically active prior to incarceration and dedicated their time in prison to teaching and mentoring fellow prisoners. While incarcerated in New York State’s Green Haven prison in the 1980’s, Ellis even used the term “credible messenger” to forecast a movement of formerly incarcerated individuals returning to their neighborhoods to reach a generation of young people whose elders had been lost to incarceration.

Yet while other peer support movements have been embraced for decades, the concept of using formerly incarcerated community members to support their peers has been slower to catch on. When it comes to the mass incarceration of black and brown men, the stigma and the social distance created by race, class, and criminalization may have made it harder for traditional social services to recognize the value of hiring formerly incarcerated people. Criminologists used to warn of the danger of socializing between people with criminal backgrounds. As a result, many parole and probation departments explicitly prohibit formerly incarcerated men and women from contact with their peers. Traditional mentoring models also tend to screen out applicants with a criminal record. And while there is ample academic research on the power of peer support in other fields, there is a dearth of academic literature on credible messenger mentoring as a criminal or juvenile justice intervention.

Nonetheless, a community movement to connect credible messengers to young people began in the 1990s. In the midst of the crack epidemic and the ensuing crack-down on crime, grassroots faith and neighborhood leaders — including many who had formerly been incarcerated or gang-involved — worked to engage young people the systems could not reach. In the mid to late 1990s, groups such as the Mentoring Center in Oakland, California, the Alliance of Concerned Men in Washington D.C., Friends of Island Academy in New York City, and the Ten Point Coalition in Boston, Massachusetts mobilized credible messengers to engage young people at highest risk for crime, violence, and incarceration. Most of these movements — community-driven and volunteer — existed under the radar of government, philanthropy and academia. Over the last 15 years, however, several formal evaluations have brought the power of credible messenger mentoring into the national spotlight.

In 1998, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), with support from the Ford Foundation and the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), launched the National Faith-Based Initiative for High Risk Youth as a research demonstration. Based on the work of Reverend Eugene Rivers and the Boston Ten Point Coalition, the Initiative mobilized congregations in high-crime neighborhoods to engage and mentor system-involved youth. Faith leaders who had once been gang-involved played a central role in deterring youth from crime and violence. During the Initiative, juvenile violent crime rates continued to fall around the nation. While research on the Initiative did not measure recidivism rates, it clearly showed that grassroots faith and neighborhood organizations were effective at engaging young

people who had previously been deemed unreachable.

In 2005, P/PV, this time with support from the U.S. Departments of Labor and Justice and the Annie E. Casey and Ford foundations, invested in a national employment-focused prisoner re-entry initiative called “Ready 4 Work.”¹² The project operated in 17 sites around the country, six of which served juveniles, and provided mentoring and workforce development programming to people returning to the community after incarceration. The research showed that the recidivism rates for Ready 4 Work participants were lower than Bureau of Justice Statistics baselines.¹³

Several of the organizations in the Ready 4 Work demonstration, such as Exodus Transitional Community in New York, were already hiring formerly incarcerated men and women to mentor those recently released from prison. Other sites chose to recruit formerly incarcerated individuals to help participants navigate challenges unique to returning prisoners. The research found that mentors who had been incarcerated were in a better position to support their court-involved mentees.¹⁴ It also found that participants who engaged with mentors were almost twice as likely to find jobs and 56 percent more likely to remain employed compared to those who did not have a mentor.

Several other programs that emphasize relationships between credible messengers and system-involved youth have completed or are undergoing evaluation.¹⁵ Roca, Inc., a Boston-based youth-serving organization, has developed a model targeting high-risk youth that seeks to keep them out of the justice system and move them into employment. While Roca identifies relentless outreach, programming, and engaged institutions as key components, it points to relationships as the primary vehicle for change:

“The underlying theory behind the High Risk Youth Intervention Model is that people change in relationships — that change comes about within the context of mutuality, shared experience, and a sense of responsibility not only to oneself but to another. Roca engages young people in relationships for the purpose of change. These relationships are called transformational relationships.”¹⁶

Roca is currently two years into a five-year Pay for Success Initiative using social innovation bonds to serve approximately 1,000 high-risk young men in Boston, Springfield, and surrounding communities.¹⁷ The evaluation will measure reduction in future incarceration with a randomized controlled trial evaluation and has a target of a 45 percent reduction in recidivism for program participants. In the second year of the initiative, Roca reports that out of 659 high-risk young men served, 84 percent were still actively engaged in the program. Of those retained in the program for 24 months or longer, 98 percent had no new incarcerations, 93 percent had no new arrests, 88 percent had no new technical violations of probation or parole, and 92 percent retained employment for at least 90 days.¹⁸

Community Connections for Youth (CCFY) is a South Bronx-based organization that has built its approach around mentors who are credible messengers. In 2010, CCFY

launched a research demonstration project that contracted faith and neighborhood organizations staffed by credible messengers to serve youth who had been arrested as a diversion from court involvement. After a three-year evaluation by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the data showed that youth served by the Initiative were 33 percent less likely to have been re-arrested than their counterparts in a balanced comparison group.¹⁹ Furthermore, the evaluation showed that youth remained engaged in relationships and programming with community organizations well beyond the duration of their mandated time in the program. The researchers identified the strength of relationships with local neighborhood residents, many of whom were formerly system-involved, as a key strength of the initiative.

Youth Advocate Programs (YAP), Inc. is a national youth-serving organization that matches young people in the juvenile justice system with advocates/mentors as an alternative to incarceration. YAP hires individuals from the same neighborhoods as the youth they serve, many of whom are formerly system-involved. A 2014 evaluation of the YAP program by John Jay found that 86 percent of youth referred to YAP remained free of arrest, and 93 percent remained in the community at the time of their discharge from YAP.²⁰ Furthermore, youth who participated in YAP were more likely to remain in the community and less likely to go into secure placement in the year following their discharge from the program, especially if they remained in YAP for more than 120 days.²¹ In 2012, the NYC Department of Probation launched a mentoring initiative based on the YAP model called AIM (Advocate, Intervene, Mentor) and required that contracted agencies hire mentors/advocates who would be “credible messengers” for youth in their communities.²²

Through the first decade of the new millennium, several cities embraced the practice of mobilizing credible messengers — mainly formerly incarcerated gang members — as “violence interrupters” to prevent retaliatory violence as part of a public health approach to gun violence. The model, known both as “CURE Violence” and “Ceasefire,” has been evaluated in several cities including Baltimore, Chicago, and New York City and has demonstrated statistically significant reductions in violence. In Baltimore, a U.S. Center for Disease Control and Johns Hopkins University evaluation showed statistically significant reductions of killings (up to 56 percent) and shootings (up to 44 percent) in all four program sites.²³ In Chicago, a U.S. National Institute of Justice and Northwestern University evaluation found statistically significant results across seven communities, reductions in shootings and killings of 41 percent and 73 percent, reductions in shooting hot spots of up to 40 percent, and the elimination of retaliation killings in five of eight communities.²⁴ In New York City, an evaluation by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance and the Center of Court Innovation showed that CURE Violence sites showed a 20 percent reduction in shootings in the target communities as compared to control group. A qualitative evaluation by the University of Chicago reported that neighborhood residents (both clients and non-clients) de-

scribed Ceasefire as a “credible community asset primarily due to the staff’s cultural capital of a similar life experience as high-risk residents (i.e. “They lived the life I live”) and strong familial and community social connections.”²⁵

CURE Violence and other Ceasefire models began as street outreach and crisis response interventions without a formal mentoring component. However, in recent years, the need of young people for authentic relationships and a positive peer culture has resulted in the creation of more structured and formal mentoring component. In 2007, the Office of Neighborhood Safety was created in Richmond, California to address gun violence. A mentoring component called Operation Peacemaker Fellowship was added to the Ceasefire strategy to provide intensive credible messenger mentoring for gang members who had already been arrested on gun charges. A 2015 evaluation demonstrated dramatic reductions in shootings and homicides for Richmond as a whole, and reduced recidivism and improved life outcomes for the gang members who participated.²⁶

Where does credible messenger mentoring live in the academic discourse on youth justice? The studies cited above evaluate specific programs and have not been brought together under an intellectual framework of credible messenger mentoring. Part of the reason for the absence of scholarly research may be that youth justice research has traditionally been grounded within the field of criminology. As Laub and Sampson point out, criminology has been historically focused on why some people *start* offending.²⁷ Present-day youth justice interventions are more focused on the risk factors that contribute to *persistent* offending and strategies to address the criminogenic needs of high-risk youth.²⁸

In recent years, scholars and practitioners have sought to push the discussion of youth justice interventions beyond its criminological origins. A growing number are questioning whether excessive focus on punishment and treatment eclipses a broader understanding of adolescent development and protective factors. Young people in the justice system, they argue, need authentic relational support from pro-social adults and peers as well as opportunities to participate in healthy community. They advocate for a positive youth development framework to inform juvenile justice interventions.²⁹

Much of this framing can be found in the seminal work: “Positive Youth Justice: Framing Justice Interventions Using the Concepts of Positive Youth Development”³⁰ In this article, the authors theorize on how the core concepts of positive youth development can be applied towards youth in the juvenile justice system:

All justice-involved youth, even those who require some of these specialized treatments, need basic supports and opportunities if they are to avoid future criminality and learn to lead positive, productive adult lives. Where should justice authorities turn to design such interventions? We suggest that PYD could be an effective framework for designing general interventions for young offenders. A positive youth development framework would encourage youth justice systems to focus on protective factors as well as risk factors, strengths as well as problems, and

*broader efforts to facilitate successful transitions to adulthood for justice-involved youth.*³¹

The authors draw from Social Learning Theory³² and Social Control (Attachment) Theory³³ to argue that just as youth learn delinquent behavior from anti-social peers, they learn pro-social behavior from positive peer groups. Forming social bonds with positive community members can also help deter delinquent youth from antisocial behavior.

In other words, youth are less attracted to criminal behavior when they are involved with others, learning useful skills, being rewarded for using those skills, enjoying strong relationships and forming attachments, and earning the respect of their communities. As these social bonds become internal, they build social control, which deters individuals from committing unlawful acts.³⁴

The positive youth justice framework argues that isolating and controlling delinquent youth is counterproductive. Instead, youth justice interventions should seek to deepen their attachments to pro-social adults, peers, and community members, in settings where they can meaningfully contribute to community development and gain skills that prepare them for adulthood. Credible messenger mentors are precisely those pro-social peers and adults with whom the young participants can relate and trust.

What We Have Learned

A POSITIVE YOUTH JUSTICE framework may be the starting point to develop a theoretical basis for credible messenger mentoring. We hope this paper will inspire scholarly interest for this important work. With credible messenger mentoring programs growing across the country, we thought it not too early to take note of what we have learned and to take a closer look in particular at the key elements of the Arches Transformative Mentoring model.

Credible Messenger Mentoring Works

YOUNG PEOPLE CAUGHT by the gravitational pull of the streets repeatedly attest that the experience represents their first connection to a positive force in their lives. In the Arches transformative mentoring program many young people stay engaged long after the stipend has ended and they have completed the program. Participants repeatedly ask for more, not only for themselves but for their family and friends who are not on probation and hence ineligible for the Department of Probation program. Once young people have been mentored by credible messengers, many express an overwhelming desire is to give back and mentor others. This has a multiplier effect. It grows the mentors as well as the youth.

Credible messenger mentoring unlocks a process by which young people in the justice system are not only deterred from crime and anti-social behavior, but develop into positive community-builders in relationship with respected pro-social peers and adults. Young people are encouraged and supported as they extract themselves from

harmful lifestyles and give back to their communities in ways that build the next generation of leadership.

Building Pathways Takes Time

PROVIDING GUIDANCE AND support for young people as they transform their lives and become engaged in education, employment and community takes time, often many years. We must design and fund programs with ladders of opportunity and without end dates so that young people, once they engage, have built-in pathways to grow within an organization. Supportive employment is one of the best ways to help grow young people. And employers are more likely to hire a young person if that person has the support of a mentor.

Mentoring Creates Job Opportunities

YOUNG ADULTS WHO have experienced the transformative power of credible messenger mentoring express an overwhelming desire to learn to mentor others. While these young people need additional training and support to become peer-mentors in their own right, above all, they need immediate opportunities for positive engagement, service and employment. As Saj Rahman, founding director of the Arches Alumni Academy for Advancement, notes, “I can bring a young person to personal transformation, but without employment opportunities, I cannot keep him there.”

Peer-mentoring is a perfect next step. Young people, once supported, are hungry to give back and help others. Their strengths as credible messengers are readily accessible to them. They are able to employ their prime assets in service to others. And the mentor training they receive is foundational. It helps them grow and develop professionally with tools that can be employed in any future career. Hiring young people as credible messenger mentors helps the youth being mentored and it also helps the mentors maintain and deepen their commitment to personal and professional growth and development.

The Arches Alumni Academy for Advancement (4As) is one vehicle to train and employ young people as peer mentors. Funding has allowed the 4As to add another step in the employment ladder, placing young people who have worked as 4As peer-mentors as Youth Fellows in social services agencies. More opportunities are needed.

Employment Barriers Remain

ONE OF THE MAJOR challenges to implementing credible messenger mentoring for youth in the justice system is the prevalence of policies that prohibit the employment of persons with felony convictions. Sometimes these barriers reflect the policy efforts of individual youth-serving agencies to screen out persons with criminal convictions as part of their child protection policy. Often the barriers are structural. Government contracting guidelines and insurers can explicitly prohibit the hiring of individuals with criminal convictions. These barriers grow out of an overly broad definition of who presents a risk to children. Certain-

ly, screening out sexual predators and person convicted of crimes against children is essential. Yet many phenomenal credible messengers have served time, paid their debt to society and are genuinely transformed. Barring these individuals from working with young people who are about to make or are making the same mistakes is perhaps a greater risk, since these credible messengers may be the only ones to whom these young people will listen.

The employment of persons with felonies as credible messengers presents an even deeper philosophical challenge to some. Peer mentors have been employed in substance abuse treatment and mental health services because social service providers recognize that “cultural insiders” often have a superior ability to reach difficult-to-engage populations. In the context of the justice system, “tough on crime” philosophies and practices have influenced some justice system professionals in the opposite direction. They view anyone with a criminal conviction through a lens that casts them as a permanent threat to public safety. This “good” vs. “bad” or “us vs. them” paradigm prevents some justice system professionals from seeing formerly incarcerated individuals as a valuable resource for working with youth.

In an effort to both change the culture and facilitate the hiring of people with criminal histories, New York City has passed legislation and implemented “ban-the-box” strategies that prohibit government and private employers from asking about a person’s criminal conviction until a formal offer of employment has been made. But there remains much work to be done to eliminate structural and philosophical barriers to employment.

The Risks are Manageable

THERE IS A LEVEL of risk inherent in credible messenger mentoring, as the individuals most qualified to reach young people have already experienced the same pressures and temptations that young people face. Mentors who are struggling financially may face temptations to earn money illegally. Mentors who live in the neighborhoods where they once engaged in violence and illegal activity may find themselves challenged by old rivals who do not believe their transformation is genuine. Mentors may face harassment from police, parole or probation officers who also do not believe they have changed their ways. For some, the experience of being incarcerated leaves lasting trauma that can affect relationships with supervisors and co-workers and can make people hypersensitive to criticism or suspicious of authority. For others, a deficit in formal education and employment leaves them underdeveloped in understanding workplace culture and professional relationships.

All of these factors can make hiring credible messengers seem like an “unsafe” decision for traditional employers, and the more risk-averse would rather not deal with these dynamics. Instances of credible messenger mentors reverting to past criminal behavior (or never having truly abandoned a criminal lifestyle) are few and far between. We see less than stellar behavior in all professions. While it does happen, we must ask: What risk is greater — the

risk of employing a highly effective mentor who has some rough edges and may relapse or the risk of operating programs that are ineffective when it comes to engaging the highest-risk youth because they refuse to hire the most effective mentors?

Thankfully there are best practices that help mitigate the risk of hiring people with criminal backgrounds.

Careful Hiring is Essential

HIRING CREDIBLE MESSENGERS as mentors is best done through a screening process that draws heavily on community validation. References and recommendations from community leaders, clergy, neighborhood residents, young people and others who can testify to the individual's transformation and current integrity should weigh more heavily than the individual's past criminal record or their education and employment history. Some programs check with local law enforcement to determine whether the applicant is suspected to still be involved with criminal activity. Often, the best people to screen aspiring mentors are credible messengers themselves. They often have the ability to discern who is authentically committed to the work. Credible messengers also have a strong vested interest in ensuring the integrity of the work and will not vouch for individuals who have not demonstrated authenticity. The point here is that the work of hiring credible messengers goes beyond the job of a human resources manager and must extend into the community.

Professional Training Hones Skills

INVESTING IN THE ongoing training and professional development of mentors is a central component of credible messenger mentoring models. Many social services agencies hire individuals who are already educated, trained and certified via professional degrees and social service experience and then try to help them become culturally competent to serve youth who are high-risk and system-involved. Credible messenger mentoring takes a different approach. Credible messenger mentoring hires community insiders who are already culturally competent, and then trains them to make sure they have the necessary skills in critical areas of youth development, group facilitation and mentoring. These two paradigms need not be in opposition to one another. It would be a mistake to simply discard all clinical staff and replace them entirely with credible messengers. Yet it is just as much a mistake to think that clinical staff can do the job of credible messenger mentors. The best credible messenger mentoring models include healthy and respectful collaboration between clinical staff and mentors where both parties value what the other brings to the table.

Because credible messengers have not necessarily had the benefit of uninterrupted education and structured professional development, on-the-job training is essential. It is important that credible messengers have access to ongoing personal and professional development to sharpen their skills, promote growth and accountability, and ensure

fidelity to best practices in the field. It also helps build organizational and community capacity in the targeted neighborhoods that serve justice-involved young adults.

One important reason to invest in professional development for credible messengers is the multiplication effect that it has on the field as a whole. When done right, credible messenger mentoring produces not only mentees who move from antisocial to pro-social lifestyles, but who also develop a strong inclination towards paying forward what they received. The "Each One Teach One" philosophy embedded in credible messenger mentoring produces mentees who aspire to become mentors, and already have experiential knowledge of what it means to walk with someone through the journey of mental, spiritual and emotional transformation. Mentees quickly develop a strong desire to mentor other youth and younger peers to support them in facing some of the same struggles they have faced. However, these mentees are equally in need of training and professional development, perhaps even more because of their youth. Investing in the professional development of employed and aspiring credible messenger mentors — and providing avenues for paid employment — elevates the work from a mere social service model to a movement for community transformation. The new Institute for Transformative Mentoring at the New School in New York City is an effort to offer structured professional development to credible messengers employed in the social service sector.

Thoughtful Supervision Leads to Success

REGULAR, STRUCTURED, THOUGHTFUL supervision is a must for any social service personnel, and credible messenger mentors are no different. This is not to suggest that credible messengers need heavier supervision or closer monitoring, but rather that the practice of paying attention to the work, assessing strengths and weaknesses, working with each individual on areas of professional development and developing strong supportive relationships between mentors and supervisors is essential for success. One credible messenger mentoring program has each employee, starting with the supervisor, regularly share their self-assessment with their team and receive feedback. This practice ensures that all mentors are continually engaged in the process of growth, change, and self-awareness.

In addition to formal supervision, credible messengers benefit greatly from coaching from a trusted and respected advisor. The best credible messenger mentor programs often have a credible messenger who is considered an "elder" by his or her peers. This individual, while not necessarily endowed with positional authority, has the moral and spiritual gravitas to hold other mentors accountable, correct them when they are wrong, guide them through challenging situations and help them deal with personal challenges that may influence their work. Credible messengers can have access to an elder, a coach, or a mentor of their own to work through these challenges.

One of the best practices for credible messenger mentoring is to conduct most, if not all, programmatic and

management practices in a group setting where mentors are coached, guided, encouraged and corrected as part of a team-based culture where there is shared accountability and support. The team-based approach to supervision, planning, self-assessment, and conflict resolution is often superior to an individualized approach.

Conclusion

TRANSFORMATIVE MENTORING USING credible messengers as paid mentors is a movement with potential to transform people, communities, non-profit organizations and government agencies. It is justice reinvestment in practice. Credible messenger mentoring has great potential to reverse the damage wrought by decades of investment in punitive criminal justice policies and disinvestment in positive community resources. The opportunities for its replication and expansion are tremendous. Open questions to consider as the movement expands include the engagement of families and the development of peer mentoring. The efficacy of various curricula, including cognitive behavioral, restorative, trauma-informed and social justice leadership, remains to be explored. As evidenced by My Brother's Keeper, society is exploring ways to invest in young men of color, especially those impacted by crime. This model meets young adults where they are and allows them to capitalize and transform what might be perceived as weakness — justice-involvement — into strength.

An Example of Credible Messenger Mentoring in New York City: Arches Transformative Mentoring

Arches Transformative Mentoring was designed to serve young people whose needs go far beyond traditional mentoring. Companionship, confidence-building and typical academic, social and career guidance are simply not enough to help young adults end involvement with the criminal justice system. At the onset of the program, nineteen not-for-profit organizations across New York City received contracts to deliver Arches in targeted neighborhoods.

The Arches model draws on principles of effective mentoring programs. It includes (1) group meetings that encourage participants to become an important support system for each other; (2) a curriculum based on cognitive behavioral principles; (3) delivered by paid credible messengers who are available for mentoring, support, advice, and guidance; (4) a hot meal at every session, shared between mentors and mentees; (5) project coordinators to supervise and case conference with mentors and liaison with contracting agencies; (6) incorporation of positive youth development values, principles and practices; (7) participant stipends; and (8) training and technical assistance for mentors. The focus is on the achievement of relational and developmental outcomes – the ability to seek help in a crisis, get along with others, show up on time, and handle a job interview – that prepare young people to succeed at education, work, and civic participation.

The following sections describe essential components of the Arches Transformative Mentoring model:

Paid Staff and a Group Process

In each Arches Transformative Mentoring group, a team of five mentors, paid a minimum of \$15.00 per hour, deliver a cognitive behavioral curriculum to a group of twenty young adults twice a week for at least six months. A hot meal is served at each session, where mentors and participants break bread together. Each session lasts

approximately one and a half hours. Participants who complete the six month program can choose to continue with the group for additional sessions. The groups are open and on-going; new participants are able to join existing groups at specified entry points (e.g., the first week of each month).

A key feature of the Arches Transformative Mentoring groups is the creation of a safe space and establishment of behavioral norms that keep all participants feeling safe and respected when they are in the program. The program is designed to retain participants even when they display negative attitudes and behaviors, not to expel or reject them during the intervention period.

In addition to the two weekly group sessions, Arches mentors are available to meet one-on-one with the young adults during the week, usually before and after group sessions. Mentors are also available by phone for support, advice and guidance. Arches project coordinators administer the program, supervise, coach and case conference with the mentors, and communicate with contracting agencies.

A Cognitive Behavioral Curriculum

Cognitive behavioral therapy works to help people solve current problems and change unhelpful thinking and behavior. Arches groups employ the evidence-based cognitive behavioral curriculum, “Interactive Journaling,” developed by The Change Companies.³⁵ The curriculum uses workbooks that provide guided questions for exploring topics such as healthy relationships, handling difficult feelings, good communication, and responsible behavior. The curriculum is age-appropriate, suitable for use by young adult populations and requires only a third grade reading level. It is iterative, so young people can join the groups at any stage in a cycle.

Participant Stipends

Resources are provided to support participating young adults. In addition

to hot food and subway fare at each session, a cash stipend of \$700.00 is available for each young adult participating in an Arches program. Payments are distributed at pre-determined intervals (e.g., \$150 after one month, \$200 after three months and \$350 after six months) based on attendance. Program stipends, even in small amounts, can be powerful incentives to participate and to avoid criminal behavior. As one Arches participant put it: “If I know I’m getting that \$50 check next week, that’s enough to stop me from going out and doing something that I usually do to get money that could get me arrested.”

Mentor Professional Development

Training and technical assistance is a key component of the Arches model. Mentors are trained in a variety of areas, including delivery of the cognitive behavioral curriculum; meeting facilitation; positive youth development; motivational interviewing; restorative practice; and gang awareness. Because mentors are often the first point of contact in critical situations, they also receive training in the basics of psychological first aid, mandated reporter obligations, mental health emergencies, and ethics and boundaries in the helping professions.

Organizations delivering Arches are provided assistance on quality control, program implementation and organizational development to ensure success. A learning community comprised of Arches mentors meets regularly in an open forum to share best practices, lessons learned, and implementation challenges that help improve work with youth. Because credible messengers frequently need to continue to work through issues related to their own incarceration and justice-involvement – including recovering from trauma, reintegrating into society, overcoming a felony conviction – mentor support groups have become a valuable part of the model.

- 1 Ruben Austria is the founder and executive director of Community Connections for Youth (CCFY), a nonprofit organization in New York City that empowers grassroots, faith and neighborhood-based organizations to develop effective community-driven alternatives to incarceration for youth. Julie Peterson is a senior program officer at The Pinkerton Foundation. Both Ruben and Julie worked with executives at the New York City Department of Probation to create and launch Arches Transformative Mentoring, a credible messenger mentoring model for young adults on probation. CCFY currently holds a contract with New York City to train mentors and assist Arches programs. The Pinkerton Foundation currently supports the Arches Alumni Academy for Advancement at CCFY and the Institute for Transformative Mentoring at the New School.
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- 5 For many years, crude interpretations of juvenile justice research suggested keeping justice-involved youth separate from one another because of the fear of criminogenic association with delinquent peers. In recent years, more finely calibrated studies have demonstrated that the risk of negative peer associations is greater when youth congregate with delinquent peers in unsupervised or unstructured environments. Haynie, D. L., & Osgood, D. W. (2005). Reconsidering Peers and Delinquency. *Social Forces*, 84 (2), pp. 1109-1130.
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