Model Education Programs for Rikers Dischargees: Supportive Basic Skills Program A Program of the New York City Department of Correction (DOC)

PROGRAM REVIEW SUMMARY

This overview of the New York City Department of Correction's (DOC's) Supportive Basic Skills Program is based on a program review conducted by Westat/Metis staff for the evaluation of the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) initiatives. The data were collected between January and June 2008 through interviews with staff of CEO, staff of the sponsoring agency (DOC), staff and administrators from Horizon Academy and Austin H. MacCormick Island Academy,[1] and staff from the provider agency (including the Interim Executive Director, Director of Education, Director of Outreach, Director of Post-Release Programming, Director of Human Resources, and other program staff); a site visit to the provider agency's offices; and a review of program documents and monthly data reports through May 2008 and management reports from DOC through June 2008.

Sponsoring Agency: New York City Department of Correction (DOC)

Provider Agency: Friends of Island Academy (FoIA)

Start Date: October 2007

CEO Budget: $75,000

Target Population: Young adult inmates (male and female) ages 16 to 24 in DOC custody

Statement of Need: Studies have shown a strong connection between lack of education, unemployment, poverty, and criminal activity. According to the DOC, about 70 percent of 16- to 24-year-olds who are incarcerated at Rikers Island are high school dropouts,[2] with 50 percent of these young adults being functionally illiterate.[3] Expansion of post-release educational programs is geared toward increasing literacy, educational skills, and occupational skills and helping stem the cycle of illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, incarceration, and recidivism.

Goal and Services: The main goal of the Supportive Basic Skills Program is to reduce recidivism among young people (ages 16 to 24) who have been released from DOC custody on Rikers Island by addressing the pressing educational needs present in this target population. The basic education classes to be provided by FoIA are designed to provide a solid foundation upon which to build toward attainment of a high school or GED diploma. In order to recognize the multiple challenges that these young people face in trying to successfully reintegrate into their communities, education services are embedded within a larger comprehensive case management framework that offers counseling and work and career supports.

Eligibility Criteria: Reading and writing below the 5th-grade level

Targets/Outcomes: The target and actual numbers for the categories presented in Table 1, as well as the per centage of each target obtained, are as of June 2008.

---

[1] Island Academy and Horizon Academy are the two high schools on Rikers Island and operate under District 79 (Alternative Schools and Programs) of the New York City Department of Education (DOE). Island Academy has three school sites and serves detained and sentenced male and female inmates ages 16 to 24 in three jails. Horizon Academy serves detained male inmates ages 18 to 24 in five jails.

[2] Travis, J., et al. (2001), "From Prison to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry." Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute. See also, Freeman, R. (1992), "Crime and the Employment of Disadvantaged Youths," in Peterson, G., and Vroman, W. (eds.), *Urban Labor Markets and Job Opportunities*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press.

[3] Hirsch, A., et al. (2002), "Every Door Closed: Barriers Facing Parents with Criminal Records." Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy and Community Legal Services.

Table 1. Supportive Basic Skills Program Outputs and Outcomes as of June 2008

Category	Target Numbers	Actual Numbers*	Percent of Target Met*
Recruitment/Assessment	100	64	64%
Transitional Plans	100	60	60%
Confirmed Arrivals	50	3	6%
Literacy Gains	18	0	0%

*Data provided by DOC

Selected Key Findings

Fidelity to the Program Model. The FoIA model offers pre-release services including outreach and recruitment sessions and the development of Memoranda of Agreements (MOAs) and Transitional Plans for those who indicate interest in enrolling in the program upon their discharge. Post-release services include three levels of education classes (literacy, adult basic education, and pre-GED/GED prep) and comprehensive support services (including case management and support groups, an employment program, and a youth development program). The DOC contract introduced two enhancements to the FoIA program model: a transportation program and the incorporation of the Wilson Reading Program (WRP) into the basic literacy classes. From the evidence available to the Westat/Metis team, it does not appear that the program model as it was originally conceived was implemented with fidelity. The WRP was not implemented with fidelity in terms of instructor training and ongoing support, or as part of a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction, which is how it is intended. In addition, staffing shortages and turnover at FoIA undermined the provider's ability to maintain a consistent presence at Rikers. The transportation component was not implemented as planned. Finally, based on conversations with FoIA and DOE staff from both Horizon and Island Academies, it seems that communication issues between the groups affected the recruitment process.

Characteristics of the Clients Served in Comparison to the Target Population. In the first year of the DOC contract, the provider was to have recruited a total of 100 participants, of whom approximately one-half would enroll in the program and one-quarter would attain the desired literacy gains. According to data maintained by the provider and reconciled by DOC, as of the end of June 2008, there were 60 young people who had signed MOAs and developed Transitional Plans. Of these, only three made the transition from Rikers to the off-island FoIA program (i.e., were "confirmed arrivals" and participated in a minimum of 9 program hours). None completed the program (i.e., received 75 hours of instruction), and therefore none attained the proposed literacy gains.

Service Delivery. The core components of the Supportive Basic Skills Program include pre-release services, which take place on Rikers Island, and post-release services, which take place at the provider's offices in midtown Manhattan. Pre-release services include outreach and recruitment activities – large-group presentations and one-on-one follow-up sessions with students who express interest in program services, during which initial Transitional Plans are developed. Post-release services include continued outreach to draw discharged young people to the provider's site to enroll in the program, intake and assessment (including mental health screening), education services, counseling (including substance abuse, men's and women's groups, and therapeutic treatment), and other youth development activities (e.g., Hip Hop Academy). Post-release services offered by FoIA are basically the same for all young people, including those eligible for the Supportive Basic Skills Program.

Provider Capacity and Agency Management. Data from interviews with program staff reveal that this past year has presented significant challenges to FoIA. There has been a great deal of staff turnover at all levels of the organization. Moreover, many of the staff positions are part-time, which limits the time and opportunities

available for collaboration. Finally, District 79 of the NYC Department of Education rescinded FoIA's status as an alternative education program. According to the DOE, this transpired because the program did not have enough participants to warrant the use of DOE teachers. The decision was also based on the fact that FoIA is three blocks away from a District 79 literacy site, and students could be served at the District 79 site instead of at FoIA. By all accounts, the loss of District 79 status dealt a significant blow to the provider and to the CEO program in particular. Having District 79 status rescinded has meant the loss of certified teachers, professional development resources, and instructional supplies and materials. Staff from DOC and FoIA have met monthly throughout the year on Rikers, and DOC conducted three site visits to the program. When it was apparent that FoIA was having significant difficulties meeting its enrollment targets, there were open and frank discussions to brainstorm possible approaches and solutions. When relations were strained with DOE personnel, DOC played a mediating role.

Early Outcomes. As of 9 months into the contract year, no participant attained a literacy gain of one grade level; therefore, there are no early outcomes to report. Because attendance data were not available for review by the Westat/Metis team, it is not clear if the three confirmed arrivals completed the 75 hours of instruction that should yield this literacy gain.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As DOC's Supportive Basic Skills Program is currently being implemented, it is not meeting key CEO criteria.

1. Although the program has had some success in recruiting participants to attend on-island activities,
2. Only three young people actually made the transition to the off-site program and none completed the program.
3. Communication issues have impeded an effective collaboration between staff from the provider agency and DOE staff on-island.
4. With the loss of DOE status and funding and the absence of an Education Director, the provider may not have the capacity to design and implement a research-based literacy program that meets participants' needs and keeps them engaged in the educational process. In addition, the Wilson Reading Program may not be a good fit with the educational needs of the target population.
5. Continued staff turnover has affected the provider's ability to meet all of the contract milestones.

The Westat/Metis team is not recommending any future evaluation studies for the Supportive Basic Skills Program.