

Life/Work Skills for Youth in Detention and in the Community

The Life/Work Skills for Youth in Detention and in the Community initiative focuses on reattachment to school and life/work skills for youth in secure detention and upon their return to the community.

<i>Agency</i>	<i>Start Date</i>	<i>Number Served per year¹</i>	<i>CEO Budget (City FY 08)</i>	<i>Total Budget (City FY 08)²</i>
The Department of Juvenile Justice	January 2008	Detention: 100-240 per week; Community: 50 minimum per year	\$145,933	TBD

Problem Statement

Each year in New York City more than 3,500 youth return to their communities from youth detention and face extreme difficulty in transitioning back to school and attaching to pro-social environments and activities.³

Research and Evidence

There are numerous initiatives nationwide targeted to disconnected youth that focus on skill building, work and educational engagement, and paths to productive futures. Model programs include employment skill training in classroom settings, internships, and educational awareness and guidance activities.

Generally, programs that specifically target youth involved in the juvenile and criminal justice system are implemented at the post-adjudication phase, and become a component of alternative disposition or re-entry initiatives. Examples include Florida Department of Juvenile Justice programs funded by the US Department of Labor, CASES and CUNY Catch in New York City, Ferris School in Delaware, Fresh Start in Maryland, and YouthBuild's Criminal Justice Re-entry Initiatives.⁴

To adapt the strengths of these programs to a younger population, best practices had to be drawn from these programs as well as other youth development programs. A review of existing programs reveals several useful or adaptable characteristics for a detention-based intervention model:

- Class/workshop sessions should be limited in size, with student-to-staff ratios no greater than 10:1.
- Many curricula include a combination of classroom employment-skill training (practice interviewing, resume writing, job search skills, communication skills, public speaking, etc.), career awareness activities (presentations by guest speakers, mentoring, focus on particular industries or work experiences, etc.), and college/educational guidance/awareness (partnerships with local academic institutions whose representatives provide guidance regarding admissions, academic programs, financial aid, etc).
- Community based youth development programs where youth can make lasting connections with a caring adult such as Big Brothers Big Sisters or the Boys and Girls Clubs of America have been found to be effective at supporting court involved youth in the community and reducing the rate of re-offense.

- Performance measurements for youth programs include short-term achievements (program attendance, participation and completion rates, heightened enthusiasm for educational attainment/careers, attainment of degrees/certificates, etc.) and long-term achievements (increased educational functioning levels, increased enrollment in employment/post-secondary education/advanced training/occupational skill training after exiting the program, etc.).
- In many jurisdictions programs are supported by community based organizations and multi-agency consortiums (government partnerships) including the prosecutor's office, public defender, departments of education including community colleges and universities, county/city probation departments, youth services agencies, as well as detention facilities.

However, there are several key challenges to implementing these models for youth in New York City's detention setting:

- The Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) has a significantly younger cohort than most other juvenile justice systems, with an average age of 15. Services offered should be age-appropriate to youth in secure custody, who range from ages 11 to 17. Therefore, the program's primary goal should be Middle and High School completion rather than career exploration.
- Youth in detention have high levels of Special Education classification and many have low-literacy levels.
- Girls in detention, while often outperforming boys in terms of educational achievement, often have histories of trauma and/or abuse and present different emotional needs that must be specifically addressed when developing program services.
- A youth's length of stay at DJJ can be anywhere from 24 hours to over 365 days.
- Youth can move from facility to facility and from secure to non-secure detention, depending upon a number of variables, some of which are unpredictable. Youth may also return to the community, be placed with the Office of Children and Family Services, or with other residential programs.
- Traditional curriculum design may not consider security and safety constraints particular to a detention setting, which may preclude activities that take place outside of a classroom setting such as internships.
- Services for youth in the community are often overlapping and lack the coordination to comprehensively address youth's needs. Absence of 'single point of contact' and lack of systems-level case management often result in disjointed service delivery.

DJJ conducted several focus groups with young people in detention and former detainees. They also hosted a forum of juvenile justice stakeholders including family court judges, probation officials, educators, and community based service providers. Feedback from these groups contributed to program design and underscored the importance of developing programs to meet the differing service needs and interests of girls and boys.

Program Description

The Life/Work Skills for Youth in Detention and in the Community initiative introduces youth in detention to opportunities, skills and resources that will allow them to reconnect to the educational and workforce mainstream upon their exit. This program is designed to improve detained youth's attitudes towards and capacities for school achievement and future work goals, and to provide youth exiting detention with a connection to resources in their communities.

The program has two phases -- the first phase occurs in secure detention facilities and the second occurs in the community once a youth is released.

Phase 1: Facility-Based Program

While in detention youth will attend weekly workshops that address educational aspirations, life skills, and future work trajectories. DJJ has contracted for the development of a 12-module curriculum that is tailored to the specific needs of girls and another for boys. The curriculum is designed to accommodate the transitory nature and differential lengths of stay of youth in detention. All young people in DJJ's long-term secure detention facilities will be expected to participate in the workshops.

Phase 2: Community-Based Program

The community-based phase begins when youth are released from detention back to the community. Upon their release, youth will continue to attend workshops once a week at a local community site, where they will receive additional curriculum instruction and be engaged in community based youth development programs. In addition, youth will receive case management and support services to ensure both re-enrollment in an appropriate school or education facility, as well as appearances for any court-related appointments.

Target population

The Life/Work Skills for Youth in Detention and in the Community initiative will serve young adults age 11 to 17 detained in either Horizon Juvenile Center in the Bronx, or Crossroads Juvenile Center in Brooklyn.⁵

Expected Outcomes

Short-Term:

- Change in attitudes or expectations of participating youth and improved ability to assess personal strengths
- Improved attitudes toward educational attainment
- Improved understanding of vocational opportunities and the concomitant skills/education needed to obtain them
- Re-enrollment in school
- Enrollment in community based youth development program

Long-Term:

- Reduction in readmission rate for program participants
- Increased school enrollment and attendance/participation
- Connection/participation in age-appropriate work-related programs in the community

¹ The program will be conducted at two facilities, Horizon Juvenile Center in the Bronx and Crossroads Juvenile Center in Brooklyn. All youth at these facilities will participate in the program. Each facility has 10 dorms, which house between 8 and 16 residents at any given time; each dorm is provided instruction once a week. Since the length of stay for each individual resident varies, the total amount of unique individuals to be served each year while in detention is unknown.

² State matching funds still to be determined.

³ CEO Report, 33.

⁴ Citizen's Committee for Children of NYC, Inc. "Keeping Track of New York City Children." 2005.

⁵ Youth in detention range in age from 7 to 18.