

House Children and Youth Committee Hearing
Delinquency Prevention and Alternatives to Detention
Thursday, June 10, 2010
House Majority Caucus Room

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I am here in two capacities: Board Member of the Youth Advocate Program, Inc.; Founder of TimeBanks USA and specifically, co-leader of the Racial Justice Initiative of TimeBanks USA.

First, I want to stop the cradle to prison pipeline. We are looking everywhere for programs and practices that can do that. Two reasons: Save money, save kids.

Second, Pennsylvania has an exceptional wealth of successful cost-effective alternatives to incarceration. We want that knowledge used, not just in one county here or there, but statewide in Pennsylvania and eventually nationwide. A brief list would include:

- Philadelphia: the Police Training Curriculum, Youth Aid Panels, use of consent decrees with expungement, and Specialty Courts – Juvenile Treatment Court, Dependency/Delinquency Crossover Court, Graduated Response Court.
- Berks and Dauphin Counties: the use of Evening Reporting Centers
- Allegheny County: the Community Intensive Supervision Program

Third, there are two programs that I know about personally, Youth Court and the Youth Advocate Program, Inc., that are particularly effective and different. Both add a different dimension. Both employ a new approach to youth-at-risk. The conventional approach is to see these youth in terms of services they need. In TimeBanking, in the Youth Court and in the Youth Advocate Program, these kids are enlisted as assets, as partners, as co-producers of successful outcomes. Both programs appreciate that these young people have a unique capacity to reach out and to affect their peers and in doing so, they help the professionals chart a different path to hope and opportunity.

That is why I was able to start the Time Dollar Youth Court in Washington, D.C. When the data came out that 54% of all African American males in D.C. between 18-35 were either in prison, on probation, parole or a warrant was out for their arrest, I was able to convince the Chief Judge of D.C. Superior Court that I had made a breakthrough discovery: “Kids don’t listen to adults. Kids listen to kids. So, why not give them a chance to help us intervene when a kid hits that trip wire called the delinquency system for the first time?”

We created a diversion program where youth come before a jury of teenagers. They have reduced recidivism by over 50% and they now handle 70% of non-violent crime by juveniles in Washington, D.C. The cost is below \$500 per kid. Most of those jurors are former offenders dealing with kids who did just what they did a few months before. Those former offenders are doing more to advance the rule of law in D.C. than my law students! We helped the Chester City High School Youth Court get going. They have been equally successful on a smaller scale. Pennsylvania could help thousands of kids and save millions of dollars taking the Youth Court to scale.

Now for YAP. I don’t join the boards of organizations, but I joined the Youth Advocate Program Board because YAP is unique. For over thirty years, it has provided wraparound services. That approach is widely recognized and widely used. Here’s what makes YAP unique:

- a. They turn down no one; they do not cream. They take the kids that no one else does and for the past thirty years, handling about 10,000 kids per year, they have a success rate approaching 85%.
- b. YAP hires residents from the zip code where the kids live. YAP then trains them as advocates – so the money YAP receives goes back into the neighborhoods where the kids live, not out into the suburbs and affluent neighborhoods where the professionals live. That’s real community economic development.
- c. The cost of YAP’s most intensive program runs about \$65 per day --compared \$200 per day for detention and residential facilities.
- d. YAP invests in strengthening the whole family, not just the designated kid.

e. Finally, YAP puts the kids to work helping each other, doing community service. Giving back. That's the point I want to stress. We all need to feel that we matter. Kids do too! The need is universal. We need to find a way these kids can feel valued because they have something we need and value.

The message we give them now is different: "You have defects. We can fix you." We say we value young people but the truth is: Unless you are a star athlete or a whiz kid at school, just trying to do the right thing, just playing by the rules and following instructions leaves you a nobody. It gets you no attention. You are taken for granted. You simply don't exist. Let's use a cost-benefit analysis. From a kid's point of view, there is no return on staying out of trouble. Oh yes. Adults will tell you that an arrest record will destroy your future. But that means little or nothing because many of these kids don't believe they will be alive past nineteen or twenty-one anyways.

Hanging out with a gang pays off. They are your family. You stick by them; they stick by you. Your mother comes home dead tired at night from the work that welfare reform has mandated she do. She has no time for you or your problems. And she can't help you with your schoolwork – and she gets lectured by the school system if you don't do your homework.

If you get in trouble, jail and detention center time is a rite of passage. And, at least you exist in the eyes of the judge, the probation officer and the system.

YAP changes all of that. It provides an Advocate who believes in you. He or she is there 24-7 including getting you up and making sure you get to school. Listening to you. Caring. Respecting you. And then, the Advocate calls upon you to help others. YAP builds a kind of extended family that you can rely on. And, that extended family really cares about you and gives you a chance to succeed. You will hear from two alums of the YAP program and what they have to tell you is more important than what I can say. But I will share one example from out of state, two projects developed by YAP kids:

- Created a survey on fire safety and surveyed community needs in their neighborhood. The youth door to door to assess fire safety readiness in homes in seniors, installed smoke detectors and conducted public demonstrations of fire safety at town fairs with fire fighters,
- Created fundraising events to raise cash for a local skate park for neighborhood kids.

Both the Youth Court and YAP treat these kids as co-workers and partners in building the world we all want. Think what it means when a kid says to another: "Don't do something stupid. Don't hurt someone. Don't risk your life or your future just because someone dared you to."

An adult can say that. But that's heard as just one more lecture. But when another kid says that, it matters in a different way. And, if these kids will help us, they need to be honored; and they deserve to be rewarded. In the Youth Court, fifty hours as a juror earns a lap top computer. For YAP, there are earned rewards that vary with each kid.

I came here because I wanted to say: Pennsylvania has a lot to be proud of. You have pioneered. You have YAP. You have Models for Change. Now you have a Youth Court. Every at-risk kid in every county in Pennsylvania needs and deserves access to the full range of opportunities. It's a lot cheaper than building more prisons. And these kids are more than just future taxpayers. These kids can do something for Pennsylvania that only kids can do: Create a peer culture of respect for teenagers who help others – a peer culture of respect and fun and achievement that outclasses anything the gangs can offer. These young people are our future; we need them to reach their peers to help build that village we all want for ourselves and our children and their children.