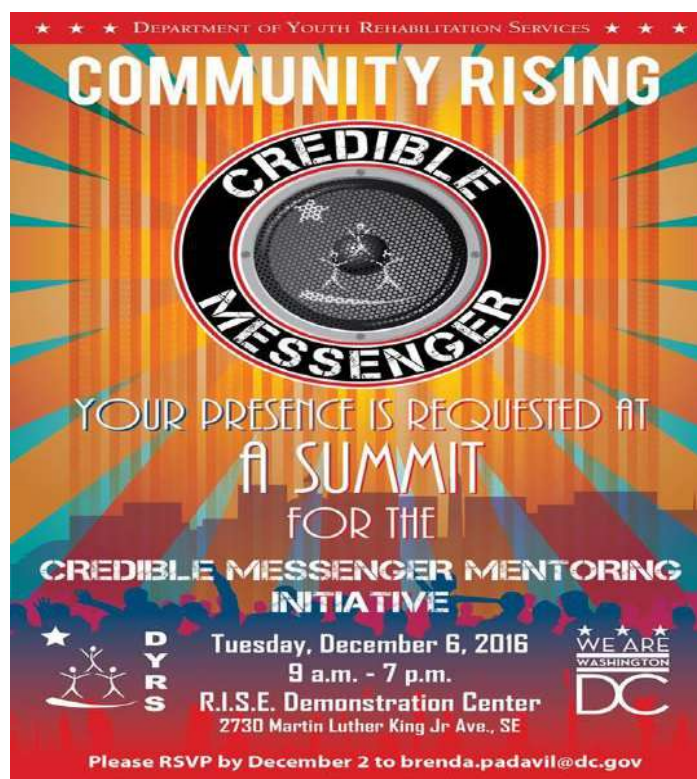


FINAL REPORT
CREDIBLE MESSENGER MENTORING INTERVENTION PROJECT
DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH REHABILITATION SERVICES, WASHINGTON, D.C. 2016-
2020

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BY

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Introduction

A four-year evaluation study of the Washington D.C.'s Department of Youth Rehabilitation's (DYRS) Credible Messenger Mentoring Initiative (CMMI) was carried out between September 2016 and September 2020. CMMI was a newly introduced program exemplifying the agency's Positive Justice approach to youth rehabilitation. Its major goals were to enable youth involved in DYRS to build their social and cognitive capacities as part of a multi-sided process of societal rehabilitation and reintegration. Key to the program was its holistic conception of young people's relationship to the agency and to the community. The study has focused on evaluating three main goals of the initiative: (i) improving the capacity-building of youth; (ii) deepening youth's ties to both the community and the family; and (iii) enabling youth to become peacemakers in their own community. The methods of the study have been primarily qualitative based on data compiled from: (i) formal and informal interviews with youth participants, parents, credible messengers, care-coordinators, family engagement specialists, program providers, and DYRS administrators and research specialists; (ii) a survey of credible messengers; (iii) curriculum materials, (iv) field observations, and (v) archival materials. These data have provided a window into: (i) the social processes related to the implementation of the program; (ii) experiences of all participants related to the program's implementation; (iii) the impact of the program on DYRS youth and their families; and (iv) the impact on the agency itself. In the final year of the evaluation, partly due to the restrictions placed on our work due to the COVID-19 crisis, we have been concentrating on producing a book manuscript documenting the theory and practice of CMMI and its various impacts for a wider audience.

Related History of Credible Messenger Interventions

Beginning in 2011, the New York City Department of Probation fundamentally changed its approach to probation services and its relationships with communities most impacted by their core policies and practices with the establishment of community-based hubs, known as Neighborhood Opportunity Networks or NeON's.

These NeON's, located in seven neighborhoods, served as local hubs of services, resources and opportunities for people under probation supervision. The NeON's also served as the sites for the department's signature youth & young adult engagement effort, known as Arches. Designed by Probation Department leadership in collaboration with Community Connections For Youth (CCFY), Arches was and is a transformative mentoring initiative that hired, trained and supported "credible messengers" to be mentors, role models and life coaches to 16-24-year-old probation clients. It is worth noting that this program that first introduced the concept of credible messengers to New York City in this iteration has grown immeasurably with the city now boasting some 2,500 credible messengers across all five boroughs operating in various capacities. It is also important to remember that the concept of "credible messengers" is strongly related to the prison reform work of Eddie Ellis and his fellow incarcerated activists during the 1980's in the New York state correctional complex.

Programmatically, Arches featured a group mentoring process through which probation clients would form trusting relationships with men and woman who shared similar life experiences and who were uniquely situated to assist those clients to successfully exit the justice system and become productive members of their communities. These credible messenger mentors, hired by local community-based organizations, received extensive training and support to fulfill their roles and worked with the probation department to engage and support its younger clients. Through group sessions, individualized intervention and round the clock access to support, the youth participants were found to experience great personal achievement including successful completion of their probation services. A recent evaluation of Arches completed by the Urban Institute in 2018, documents successful aspects of the program including a reported 60% reduction of recidivism on the part of program participants.

In 2015, Clinton Lacey, the former New York City Department of Probation's deputy commissioner and one of the principle architects of Arches, became the director of Washington DC's DYRS. As Washington DC's juvenile justice agency, DYRS is responsible for administering a local youth detention center (YDC), a juvenile rehabilitation treatment facility (known as New Beginnings) and a wide array of community based residential and programmatic services such as vocational training, tutoring, group homes, computer literacy and certification in Microsoft programming. As DYRS director, Lacey led the implementation of the Credible Messenger Mentoring Initiative (CMMI). This iteration of

the program includes the core features of Arches and has continued to develop the model, including its holistic expansion to a full family approach, where siblings, extended family members, parents, and other relevant care givers and loved ones of those under DYRS care, have access to their own credible messenger mentoring services. However, the Credible Messenger program is not an extension of probation – though credible messengers and program managers collaborate with probation officers and other stake holders.

This expansion of services represents DYRS's effort to invest, not just in the direct engagement of court involved youth, but also in their broader circle of support and ecosystem in the community. This is an effort to build family & community capacity to more successfully care for its youth. The holistic, community-related ambitions of the model is best understood by the learning community that has developed around the initiative and the different levels of agency that has ensued. One example of this is the Credible Messenger Learning Community *Elder's Council* that was established in 2018. This is a group of senior members from the Washington DC community who have wide-ranging experience in grassroots community service and engagement and who serve as an advisory body to CMMI. Its members include a number of participants who were actively involved in closing down of Oak Hill, the infamous youth detention facility that previously held most of DYRS's committed youth, in 2009.

Literature Review

The general trend in juvenile justice over the last several decades has been toward reducing the gap between juvenile and adult sanctioning guidelines and models. At the same time, nominally, rehabilitation remains the primary objective of the juvenile justice system. The objective maintains overwhelming public support despite the institutional trend and across the ideological divide. In a recent national survey (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2014), 78% of self-identified Democrats and 70% of Republicans agreed that, among other options, what was more important to them personally was 'getting juvenile offenders the treatment, counseling, and supervision they need to make it less likely that they will commit another crime, even if that means they spend no time in a juvenile corrections facility'. The sentiment embodies recognition of the problem of high rates of recidivism and the harm caused by 'juvenile offenders' who become adult criminals within already distressed communities. Indeed, while rates of youth criminality have declined sharply from their peak in the late 1980s, recidivism rates remain practically unchanged.

There is reason, furthermore, to be concerned with the possibility of a reversal of the trend of criminal offending rates, as well as the development of a criminal underclass through an increasingly punitive juvenile justice system. Recognition of the dynamics of these phenomena is hardly missed by the front-line personnel of juvenile justice. For instance, in a recent national survey by the Urban Institute of juvenile court judges, probation officers,

prosecutors, and defense attorneys, 'alternatives to secure detention (51%), policymaker support for rehabilitation (50.7%), and developmentally appropriate services (48.4%) were the top three issues identified across practitioner groups as critical to improving juvenile justice' (Willison et al., 2010, p. 2). An improved juvenile system would better secure its primary objective, and, in the process, facilitate the reintegration of young offenders into the community.

Recognition of the onus to discover methods of reintegration appears increasingly pronounced within public, political, debate. A growing bipartisan consensus has emerged particularly around the idea that greater attention should be given to the mentorship of at-risk and formerly incarcerated youth offenders, as part of the rehabilitative ideal and as a practical method of reintegration (Bois, 2011). As a result, over the last two decades mentoring programs have grown alongside the punitive turn in juvenile justice -- with mixed results. The idea is hardly new. '[B]ut an important tipping point came with the publication of the previously noted impact study of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA), conducted by researchers in Public/ Private Ventures in Philadelphia in the mid- 1990s' (Rhodes and Dubois, 2006, p. 9). The findings were cited widely in social research and news articles and on the floor of the U.S. Senate.

But enthusiasm for mentoring has outpaced evidentiary support. The question of what works is also made complicated by the fact that there are now many types of mentoring. Programs continue to evolve and proliferate without the development of research protocols, including for instance the tracking of differentially processed populations that might serve to distinguish representative samples from control groups. The most ambitious type of mentoring program, thus far, involves mentors deemed credible by virtue of sharing similar backgrounds as the mentees (which oftentimes includes incarceration). The 'credible messenger' is expected not only to help with the development of cognitive and social skills that are relevant to established methods of reintegration, particularly school and employment opportunities, and motivational enhancement therapy for the treatment of substance abuse; but also, to provide a mediating link to community networks in which social capital is developed.

In New York City, the innovative ARCHES program, which was launched in 2012 with private funding, is managed by the Department of Probation and claims great success in the reduction of recidivism rates (Lynch et al., 2018). During 2015-2017 a range of stakeholders were interviewed and the evaluators were involved in direct observation. 279 Arches participants were compared with a group of 682 young people who began probation at the same time without participating in ARCHES. The program revolves around the development of trusting relationships with the aim of teaching life- skills, modeling behavior, and addressing substance abuse through motivational enhanced therapy – much like the Credible Messenger Initiative.

The cognitive -behavioral aspect of the program is difficult to distinguish from the type that is found within any standard probation or parole intervention, in that it seeks to bring into view 'the person's perception of a situation – automatic thoughts – than the situation itself' (Lynch, p. 4), and to reduce 'adult and juvenile recidivism' through the inclusion of 'anger management and interpersonal problem- solving components' (Lynch, p. 4). Mentors understood their role as facilitating 'positive changes in thinking and behavior' and related such changes to 'future employment opportunities and services, and positive relationships with others' (Lynch, p. 16). There is nothing particularly innovative about these strategies which have been borne from necessity. The addition of motivational enhancement therapy is not however compatible with the logic of parole, since it evokes the need for applied empathy and the development of an argument- free zone, that is, a safe space, free of judgment. The innovative part of the program appears in summaries of interviews of mentees, where what was deemed most important to them were things like 'close relationships' with mentors whose backgrounds were similar to their own, who they could trust and upon who they could rely upon in troubling situations. Mentees, for the most part, measured the success of the program in terms of the support they received. They 'described how ...mentors helped them take steps toward achieving personal goals and emphasized that this process reinforces a positive relationship with their mentors' (Lynch, p. 16).

We submit that the success of Arches is better measured, at this point, by qualitative data than by a 'quasi-experimental' evaluation that lacks relevant protocols, including a proper control group. Noting that re-arrest rates were virtually unchanged, the 'reconviction' rates may be interpreted in a number of ways while not enough quantitative data are available to reconcile the contradiction by reference to types of offenses or backgrounds of the re-offenders.

The mentoring literature is consistent about the following aspects of the relationship between mentor and mentee: frequency and duration of contact, and trust. While fewer than weekly meetings appear inadequate to establish a meaningful therapeutic relationship when motivational enhancement therapy is deemed warranted. Typically, one year of frequent contact is needed to establish a trusting mentoring relationship. The mentor- mentee relationship, under these circumstances fulfills the original premise of the Big Brothers and Sisters as based on the substitution of dysfunctional or absent relationships with primary care givers, neighbors, community elders, etc.

The central problem with the program, which appeared early in its inception, has been its high turn-over rate of mentors. This problem has reappeared in practically every mentoring program where frequency of contact and durability of relationships are expected. As a result, many programs have 'lowered the bar' for volunteerism, against the findings of research, while others have moved away from volunteers entirely (Rhodes and Dubois, 2006). The

formalization of the role appears as the only viable solution to the problems encountered by mentors, namely that they are expected to make a greater commitment of time and resources than what may be reasonably expected from people whose livelihood is unrelated to mentoring (Unruh et al., 2005).

Transformative mentoring, however, has increasingly been seen as a way to address some of these problems (Austria and Peterson 2017). In this approach, knowledge of the problems and challenges facing young people in the juvenile justice system, is expected not only to become integral to the transformation of the mentee, but also to provide a communal context for that process. The transformation, therefore, may be understood as a collective achievement with the more involvement from the community, including families, schools, and employers, the better. For instance, young people in the juvenile justice typically have increased difficulties in finding employment, given the stigma of 'ex- offender'. This is why, for instance, the Institute of Transformative Mentoring (ITM) at the New School has attached the concept of credible messenger to the goal of restorative justice – which seeks to involve the victims of crime in the process, as well as the groups and organizations whose objective it is to restore order and justice in victimized communities. This logic parallels the CMMI, where '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' (Austria and Peterson, 2017:3). Thus, the mentor becomes credible by virtue of the validation of the community of him/her as a transformed individual able to teach others. The goal, then, is to reproduce the context and to maintain pro-social relationships in circumstances and situations beyond the reach of the program, where ex- offenders may themselves mentor others.

Research Design

This evaluation project drew on the principles of action research aiming to document humanistic and social change interventions through a shared relationship with all intervention actors. In the case of CMMI this includes the youth in the program, program practitioners, agency staff and the administrators of DYRS. The collection of data of the evaluation project took place over three years and provides an analysis of the CMMI's social and institutional processes, theories, practices and outcomes through traditional and innovative evaluative tools involving the interpretation of both qualitative and quantitative data. During our time in the field DYRS has given our evaluation team unprecedented access to internal records, group mentoring meetings, front- line personnel, service providers, families, community members, and other relevant stakeholders. A key principle of this collaborative evaluation project is the establishment of a system to provide those involved in the intervention with ongoing constructive feedback based on the project team's observations and overall data collection. As noted, the primary goal of the project, therefore, was to provide DYRS with a comprehensive and credible evaluation of the CMMI's

effectiveness in reaching its stated goals of: (i) improving the capacity-building of youth in the program; (ii) deepening youth's ties to both the community and (iii) enabling youth to become peacemakers in their own community.

Data Collection

Qualitative Interviews:

During the three years structured and semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out with the following (see appendix for the questionnaires):

Youth: 80 (formal)

Credible messengers: 55 (formal) 100 (informal)

Parents: 7 (formal) 3 (informal) and 3 focus groups

Care Coordinators: 5 (formal) 10 (informal)

Family engagement specialists: 7 (formal)

Detention Center Staff: 6 (informal)

Elders: 4 (formal)

Current Administrators: 15 (formal) 75 (informal)

Previous Administrators: 3 (formal)

Field Observations:

In situ observations were carried out focusing on participant engagement, effective articulation of positive justice values and practices, and environmental culture. The following were the stipulated events and settings.

Group settings, these involve weekly meetings with youth and their provider team – 100

Trainings: 3-day long credible messenger trainings – 3; 2-day long training for future family engagement specialists – 1

Bootcamps: 10/11/16-10/15/16

Summits and Conferences: DYRS & Credible Messenger Summit (with invited guests from across the U.S. and local officials & National Network of Credible Messengers – 2

Social Events: picnics, graduation celebrations, external trips (e.g. Dave and Buster's Indoor Arcade) - 5

Peace Covenants: 2

Other settings:

Martin Luther King Achievement Center – 20

450 H Street Achievement Center – 20

New Beginnings – 35

Monthly Phone-Ins with Providers – 43

Survey (see appendix for survey instrument):

Surveys were administered to: 42 credible messengers during the 2016 boot camp

Archives:

Archives were collected that included – curriculum materials for the boot camp and seven pillars, handbooks for the care coordinators, media coverage of DYRS activities, reports of other mentoring interventions with similar goals, DYRS newsletters, published materials for large meetings and conferences, and the San Kofa Legacy Report (the Elders Council).

Analysis

Analysis of the data has been done through the systematic coding of the interviews focusing on theme development in the experiences of subjects in relation to their participation in the initiative.

Periodic Reports

Five periodic reports (including this one) have been produced by the team followed by meetings with the CMMI leadership to discuss the results. In addition, team members have been in regular contact with the initiative's leadership in order to share our observations of the initiative's progress. Such discussions also involved planning of the first national conference of the credible messenger network and the participation of team members in a regional network meeting.

Evaluation Findings and Analyses Based on the Collected Data

- Qualitative Interviews

Youth Experiences

Youth without exception have spoken positively of the impact of the credible messengers (CMs) in their lives and the difference it has made to their: (i) self-confidence, (ii) self-value, (iii) attitudes towards education, (iv) coping skills, (v) independence, (vi) relations with their families, (vii) a bridge to life, (viii) feelings about their community, and (ix) future outlook. The majority of youth have built a long-lasting trust relationship with their CMs, often viewing them as an integral part of their daily lives and as people who can be called upon in everyday situations as well as in times of crisis. Youth subjects saw CMs as playing an essential mentoring role in their lives, helping them to navigate formerly difficult terrains, especially in relationships with state agencies and/or institutions. The CMs, therefore, became viewed as a bridge between the informal social worlds of youth and the formal, often bureaucratic worlds of the larger society, helping youth to rebuild broken or distant relationships with adult society, relationships that had become overly fragmented and strained. Most youth subjects spoke of developing greater insights into their past behavior, an important cognitive development that helped them make better, more informed choices as they matured and transitioned along complex pathways of family, community, work and school reintegration. Below are the major themes of the youth experience drawn from the qualitative interview data, with most of the quotes come from youth subjects with a few exceptions where noted:

- Self-confidence

In the interviews youth subjects often discussed their increased self-confidence obliquely. Although it was obvious as they noted their achievements since being in the program and their changed outlooks for the future (see below), that had achieved a marked change in their abilities to take on new tasks and begin journeys toward their goals. The comment below from one of the program's staff relates to how youth negotiate their paths forward, seeking goals that previously might not have been attainable. But the youth now had his mentor in his corner and the crucial provision of resources from the agency that provided him opportunities that he took and eventually made a critical step forward in the world of work. The young person was interested in taking an exam to enter a construction apprentice program, which the messenger advocated for:

R: She was his care coordinator and she said "that's very expensive," and we said "but he's worth the investment." So lots of paperwork, K. advocating on the family side, you know really pushing her to get it done, and then he failed the test. So it was kind of like you know,

and we spent like \$1500 getting these tools...I said you gonna go to that local 23 and you gonna take that exam until you get a high enough score to get into their apprenticeship program. When he called me, this was June, and said "J, I got in, I passed the test, thank you so much." So all of the dinners, all of the coaching, all of the "you can do it," all of the "attaboy"s, and keeping him confident enough, staying away, you know he stopped smoking during his time, you know with us, he doesn't even smoke anymore...so now he's well on his way to makin' \$30 an hour" (Family Engagement Specialist).

- Self-value

Self-value is very much linked to self-confidence and various pathways to self-image, empowerment and orientations toward the future. In the subject's response below, is an excellent example of what so many youths experience in their struggles against societal rejection, marginalization and criminalization. The levels of social exclusion can lead to young people drawing quite dramatic conclusions about who they are and how they are valued, resulting in their self-disappearance, especially from our formal institutions of socialization. This respondent's short reply speaks volumes about these processes and the ways in which they are felt and experienced. A critical property of the initiative is the space it creates for self-reflection and the encouragement of a language through which youth can describe both their inner and outer pathways of growing up.

R: Ok. How have you been impacted by absence in your life, by people not being there?

I: I made a lot of bad decisions

R: You made a lot of bad decisions? Who was absent from your life?

I: I excluded myself

- Attitudes towards education

Education plays a critical role in the empowerment pathways of youth subjects. Despite the numbers of youth diagnosed with various learning disabilities, many of the subjects spoke positively and enthusiastically about seeking routes into earning more education credentials be it high school or college. In the first quote, the subject talks about the important role of his mentor in making sure he takes school seriously. In this case, the youth sees the mentor playing the role of a father, one he never had.

R: Oh he, oh man! I ain't even gonna. He get on me like, like I'm his son! Know what I'm saying? If I make, I mean, especially in school, if I make a mistake at school, he gonna get on me.

I: Like what kinda mistakes?

R: Like, like if I get a mistake at school like, being disrespectful, stuff like that at school, he ain't havin' that, he ain't tolerating that. He gonna come up there.

The two quotes below are instructive, with the first showing the youth's intention to move to the next level of his educational career and aim at entering a college but as yet has little idea of the direction. In the second quote we see the youth regarding the college with less of an instrumental orientation but rather the thought that he wants that experience and deserves to have that opportunity. Both these conclusions drawn by the youth are attributed to the influence of their mentor.

R: I'm a be honest with you, I'm a get a degree in somethin', but I'm a find that out when I get there. I'm a find out what it is I'm lookin' for when I get there or what it is I have an interest in when I get there.

R: But you know what my man said, my man said, it's for the experience, I wanna go to college for the experience. 'Cause somethin' like that can't be taken away from me and I wanna find out what it is I wanna get my degree in and what I wanna get into.

Finally, the following subject is thinking about another future trajectory aside from college and wonders about his pathway into the world of work. The subject is likely to have had some experience in the informal economy, which may have been the only opportunity to earn money in his community but now change means that he can look elsewhere to earn a living. For this subject this is a major point of transition, and again it is the mentor who is credited for showing him the way.

R: I feel like it changed a lot, changed a real lot, cuz I was on a-I was kind of getting on a positive level, but I think he steered me in the right direction cuz he put alot of opportunities at my feet, like coming to work for this place. I probably wouldn't have thought I could change cuz you know I ain't-I ain't got an education. I was at GED but I never finished it. Once I came home I forgot about that, so. I got my first job, then that gave me a little motivation to know i could do something without an education but-he showed me I could do something without an education.

- coping skills

Most of the subjects spoke of extremely traumatic pasts and living situations that were often chaotic with little stability or effective adult authority. Thus, youth frequently related how they had often been placed in stressful situations for which they had to develop their own coping skills to deal with their fluctuating emotional states as well as their basic economic and social needs. In the first quote below, the subject is discussing precisely how she was dealing with the loss of her mother and her father being incarcerated by rejecting any form of adult social control, viewing it quite rationally as illegitimate. She is comparing how she was then, when she came into the program, to how she is now engaging in a highly productive relationship with her mentor. In the second quote, the subject discussing a

different set of coping skills, this he calls “patience.” Here, it seems the subject is referring to the ability to focus on certain tasks, to develop a body of knowledge and to prioritize a set of goals to cope with his economic needs.

R: That’s all I ever knew so I felt lost, like, I felt like I didn’t want nobody telling me nothing. “Come right here or do this,” “Oh, you don’t control me. You don’t control me.” It’s like - you don’t control me, you not my mom. My dad he’s already-my dad, he locked up at the time, not any more but at the time when my mom passed away he was locked up so it’s like, what? Who is you, you ain’t about to tell me, I don’t care who you is.

R: I mean, I’m learning a whole lot more life skills, characteristics about myself that I didn’t know, started gettin’ more money.

I: So like, what’s the life skills you’re learning?

R: I mean, life skills, pretty much I mean patience, and I don’t know, like business, like how to conduct in the studio, in the music studio, and stuff like that, stuff I ain’t never known.

- Independence

Many of the youth have lived through a traumatic adolescence often resulting in their emotional development being somewhat stunted or delayed. Without the opportunity to exercise desired levels of control over their lives, it has been difficult for them to experience what it is like to plan their lives with any certainty or agency. However, the program is precisely about helping youth to develop such capacities and to encourage them to take responsibility for their current and past actions and to learn how to exercise good judgement in making decisions. Since many youths are reaching their 18th birthday, with a few who are already at that age, the need to think about independence and all that this entails is of major importance.

R: I believe I’ve improved due to this program because when I first came here I wasn’t mentally prepared to live on my own

I: You weren’t mentally prepared to live on your own?

R: Nah, I was immature, you could say

- Relations with their families

Youth discussed at length the difficulties they had in reintegrating into family life, especially in homes which had been highly fragmented and where so many painful memories for the subjects were still present. As mentioned earlier and in other parts of this report, the experience of loss and/or absence was present in every interview but the potential of the family to still be a source of social support and comfort was generally still viable. Youth

reflected with great insight into this process and were mostly prepared to play their role in helping the family reunite and heal.

R: Yeah, my mom is there now, once I understood why she couldn't help me. 'Cause she didn't have the capacity to help herself. So, she's now, we're now workin' on a relationship. Now I go over to her house every weekend, and I spend time with her, and stuff like that.

R: In general, I've been impacted with absence and J's been helpin' me actually get through it. She helps me understand the reality and my dreams and wishes. She does not wanna take anybody 'cause she is more to connecting family together, reunitin' 'em. But then she also understands that some people are just not in a capacity of forgiveness. So if she feel as though it is her duty, her job in the spirit of her religion to give it too, she feel as though it's her job to give it to people who actually want it.

I: Do you- do you have any feelings about-on how that absence affected you? The fact that he wasn't there?

R: I mean, I feel like I could've been a better person if I done had my father, you know. I learned a lot of manly stuff from my mother and the stuff. What I couldn't learn from her I learned from the boys around me that wasn't my family that was outside.

- A bridge to life

Youth frequently talked about their mentor as bridge to a better place, to a space where the subject had more control over his or her life and where peace and stability was a possibility. Once crucial part of this relatively new attitude and orientation was the recognition and consciousness that the mentor was living proof that that transition can be made. In state response below, the youth is paying his respects to his "old head" mentor, in essence, affirming his credibility as a messenger and his function in providing this youth with the levels of counseling and advice to navigate through a risk-filled environment.

I: How does he do that? What does he say to you?

R: 'Cause he give me that, that ability, he be like "Man, it's fucked up out here, you know what I'm saying? It's fucked up out here. Come on man, do better." And every time he put that in my head, I be 'freshing it like. I ain't like, "my man did like seventeen years in jail," you know what I'm saying, like I gotta take it from an old head that's came home, you know what I'm saying? So, you gotta look at it as like that too. Right, like it's not even about how you do it, it's about how it's been done.

- feelings about their mentors and the community

The interviews carried out at this stage did not dwell too much on community questions and this area of concern will be much more of a focus in the evaluation's third year. In general,

youths had a good deal of ambivalence about returning to their respective community largely based on the knowledge that many of these communities are still dealing with significant levels of violence while they have not seen the kinds of social and economic investments that produce shared optimism for the future. However, many youth asked why their relationships with their mentors had to end, especially after they had built the kinds of relationship that the program wants.

R: Yeah, I wish they didn't have the policy where you can't get too attached, we're human beings, we're human beings, and that, that, policy contradicts human beings' feelings, emotions, and thoughts, because if I get good and with X we got a bond, even outside of here, like even outside of the credible messenger, the mentors are supposed to be lifelong relationships and with the policy that says that they can't get attached or they can't do too much, it's really, defeats the purpose of a mentor.

- future outlook

The question of the future for some of the youth was difficult to answer, particularly those who were recently admitted to the program. However, for youth contemplating their next steps and looking forward to ending their commitment with the agency then thinking about what was on the horizon was obviously much more urgent and impending. The first quote below is quite typical of most of the subjects that broached this question in that the future is an ambiguous place and space somewhere out there. But this makes total sense considering the complexity of the spaces that youth are passing through in such a short time. For they are moving between the community, the family or group home, the neighborhood, and the agency as a highly controlled environment. The first youth speaks to this “thereness” in his conceptualization of the future whereas in the second quote, from a credible messenger, he locates the future within a vocabulary of hope and possibility. We feel that a major goal of the initiative is to unite the two.

R: I'ma be honest with you, I'ma get a degree in somethin', but I'm a find that out when I get there. I'ma find out what it is I'm lookin' for when I get there or what it is I have an interest in when I get there.

“You know um, so it gives them a sense of hope, and it lets them know that they can overcome whatever. Whether it be mental illness, emotional, and behavioral illnesses, trauma, you know poverty, whatever. If the credible messenger mentors are understanding of their situation and can reach that child, I believe that child can have hope, and it'll make them want to do better. It's almost like “I have this person that really you know they're here for a paycheck but they put in the that effort for me, so let me put in some effort and show them, make everybody proud.” So, it gives them that sense of hope and lets them know that

they can do it, that all is not lost. You know what I mean? Like tomorrow is another day to start over. “

- Reflecting on gender relations

Several youths discussed how they had begun to rethink their relations with the opposite sex after the issue of double standards in male/female relationships came up in group discussions (see below). We noted in our observations of these exchanges the male subject might become very defensive and be unwilling to reflect on his behavior, at least openly. We also noted how female subjects were very quick to point out the unacceptability of this behavior among males. Such discussions served as a basis for further reflection and in some cases began a process of changed behavior. During individual interviews youth often mentioned how these discussions influenced them such as the following:

Respondent 1: “When I hear it from the girl's point of view I realized that once I am dishonest why should she be honest.”

Respondent 2: “My man says he trusts me but when he is all in my business, I think maybe he thinks I am doing what he is already doing.”

Credible Messengers

Credible messengers reported mostly highly positive experiences of their roles, practices and effectiveness. They appreciated that they were on a learning curve but the longer they spent in the field the more they could appreciate their impact on the lives of the youth and became more conscious of the program's complexities within the diverse universes in which so many youth found themselves. They were clear about the often violent worlds in which youth learned to co-exist and survive, and could appreciate the myriad ways in which their influence aided youth in making positive choices, resisting everyday pressures to engage in behavior that could be self-destructive and even life-threatening. In dealing with the everyday problems of the mentees credible messengers often reflected on their own complicated life courses and pathways toward empowerment, often after periods of involvement with the criminal justice system. All those interviewed felt that being a credible messenger mentor could evolve into a worthwhile career, especially if the initiative became institutionalized at DYRS.

Observing the progress of credible messengers over the two years we found that during the first year there were some difficulties with messengers becoming integrated into the overall operation of the agency with some tensions between messengers and case managers (now titled as care coordinators). These seemed to be mainly related to: (i) the recognition of newly assigned roles, (ii) expectations, (iii) work boundaries and procedures, (iv) team

decision meetings, (v) the administration of flex funds, and (vi) conflicting philosophies of working with the youth. Over time these tensions lessened with credible messengers reporting increased levels of trust and cooperation between themselves and the care coordinators, with all of the messengers describing strong working relationships with more than one coordinator and supervisor.

In summary, all of the messengers (interviewed) reported great satisfaction in the positive and changed behavioral patterns of their mentees, seeing their influence contributing significantly to:

- increased school enrollment and attendance;
- the development of trust relationships with youth who were originally, suspicious and reticent;
- youth who engagement in conflict avoidance and conflict resolution;
- improved communication between youth and their families;
- helping youth transition from group homes back to their families;
- assisting families with obtaining shelter including helping families relocate to neighborhoods with increased levels of safety; and
- helping youth obtain vocational training and employment.

At the same time, messengers also expressed frustration, concern and/or dissatisfaction with the following:

- gas reimbursement policies;
- fear about personal safety;
- the amount of time required for writing notes and other forms of documentation;
- youth and families that refused to interact with messengers;
- youth that continued to re-offend; and
- youth that did not want to avail themselves of the agency's services.

After observing messengers in multiple settings, including trainings covering a wide range of topics from administrative procedures to stages of change and motivational interviewing, the messengers reported an overall satisfaction with their progress in the field and their training on the job, although some criticized the practice of having trainers who were mostly outsiders, i.e., were neither from the agency nor familiar with the DC area. To give an indication of the inner experience of credible messengers and their orientations to their work, below is an analysis of the primary themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews with a sample of ten subjects, all of whom were hired at the program's inception.

- Love

The concept of “love” is a key component of the positive and restorative justice approach of the CMMI and it is also one of the six pillars used in the agency’s basic principles for attaining a more peaceful social order in the community and the rehabilitation of committed youth. Therefore, love is a constant theme in relations between messengers and their mentees and demonstrates the centrality of compassion, solidarity, and understanding in their day to day interactions. In the response below, the messenger is describing what makes a mentee change to a more positive pathway.

R: Genuine love, like what C. has said from the very beginning. The kids will let you know, they don't care what you know, they care how much you love 'em, how much you care about them. And they know, when it's real, and when it's you know, just about a paycheck. Or you don't really care whether or not I have something to eat, whether I have clean clothes. So, they know when it's for real because they come back. Even our post-committed youth that are doin' well. Like D., he was one of my very first cases, but we stuck with it with him.

- Commitment

In this exchange, the messenger echoes some of the above comments, but emphasizes the necessity of commitment and perseverance in the relationship. For this subject, the harsh reality of the mentee’s economic circumstances, i.e., poverty, is always in the background and is the material context for the development of their relationship and his or her work in the field. Moreover, the subject understands the importance of working on the mentee’s self-image, knowing that a negative sense of self is a corner stone of fatalism in poor communities from which most of the messengers come.

R: You really, you really have to have a heart, for this. And you have to be called to it, because there's so many people who get into it, and they think of the money. You know you're not gonna get rich. It's not something that, you can say affords you a certain type of a lifestyle. You have to be committed to this because it's just the right thing to do...to see people who would ordinarily not have an opportunity, seeing themselves in a better light. Take R. for example, she doesn't see herself ever coming out of her situation, so I have to keep showing her the picture. I have to keep giving her the vision, so she can see the vision herself. I think anybody who's doin' this for the political motivation or the, you know, the accolades that come with pushing yourself up some ladder or building an empire, then you're doin' it for the wrong motivation. You really do have to have a care and concern about these kids as if they were your own, 'cause that's what makes you get up when they call in the middle of the night, that's what makes you keep digging for answers when they're turning you away or cursin' you out or screamin', sayin' "I don't want your help." But your behavior says you need my help, and you keep goin' after them, til they recognize that they need you."

- Connection

The messenger below makes an important observation that was repeated widely in the data. A key element of a successful relationship is connectivity and an openness in communication which makes it the norm for mentees to contact their mentors at all times, both good and bad. For, messengers also noted that many youth are not used to trusting adults due to so many bad experiences, from abandonment and neglect to physical and emotional violence. But how to attain and maintain that level of connectivity is not so easy, although interviewees saw its necessity.

R: Yeah, yeah yeah. My man, the best kid, one of the, my best kids you know what I'm sayin'? He has his challenges. But, even when these kids aren't doin' what they're supposed to be doin', if they have a connection with anybody, right, they'll reach out to 'em even during times when they are not doin' the right thing, and that's important.

- Fictive Kinship

Below, the subject has been asked what kind of person can make that connection, as described above. He responds with reference to the messenger playing the role of fictive kin in his relationship with the mentee and the family. Messengers frequently fill the role of the fictive uncle or aunt and some are even referred to as the father who was never there in some of the youth interviews. But the respondent also notes something else about the now established connection, and that's the mutual recognition of having walked the same paths and having made similar experiences. According to the respondent, recognizing that we have "travelled the same roads," creates a powerful basis for his mentoring relationship and easily dissolves the generation gap.

R: Um, we, our credible messengers is that person. They that uncle, that daddy, that brother, that male figure in their world that's trying to show them the right way, you know what I mea. Because it's like if a person, if a person don't love you they're not gonna correct you. So now, here it is that you have this example...you have somebody that have probably traveled the same roads that have they story that you can't look at as "oh he just an old man," you know?

- Deep Involvement

The boundaries between messengers and mentees have to be flexible. Obviously, there are professional boundaries that must be negotiated and maintained in conversation with the agency (such boundaries, however, are different to those of care coordinators). Nonetheless the messenger is conscious that he or she has to be involved in many different aspects of the mentee's life that develop across time, which is precisely what a holistically based

intervention is based upon. In the respondent's statement below, he is discussing a common theme regarding the condition of poor children who might have suffered years of neglect or inconsistent conditions of care. In this case, the respondent shows the profound sensibilities of the messenger, the knowledge that working with these youth requires paying attention to all aspects of their presentation of self. In effect, they all relate to their pathways of empowerment, self-realization and self-value.

R: When I see that they kinda reserved, kinda standoffish, not dealing, and it's crazy 'cause we got more boys than girls and they always wanna be the tough one and I often see like, ok so one may have hygiene problem. "He ain't right," and his credible messenger is the other person's credible messenger, so the credible messenger definitely has to work with him on hygiene. That's part of the success plan. That's part of gettin' him groomed properly. You know, making him feel his esteem. Then maybe not that night, another credible messenger may take him home because one young person was probably just being like "nah, he ain't getting in with us." And the next thing you know, the credible messenger is working with him on hygiene but also working with him on how he conversin' and talkin' and puttin' him out there. You know, that type of thing. Next thing you know they gotta be around each other because your credible messenger is just not your credible messenger. I wish we had a world where you just get one person but the ratio is technically eight to one. Half the time it's twelve to one.

- Creating Empathy

The mutual aid that young people provide one another involves strengthening empathy. Messengers regularly encouraged their mentees to put themselves in the shoes of others. They also promoted conversations that tied youths' individual and family problems to larger social issues. Messengers thought that the ability to identify with others and with the community has transformative possibilities for the behavior and outlook of the youth and through community involvement self-efficacy becomes a part of neighborhood efficacy. Below, a youth in the program reflected on the empathy she has been encouraged to develop as well as modeling a behavior for others, in answering a question on the six pillars.

I: How have you used your words to help someone?

R: Oh, a lot. I been through way more than people older than me, so when I see someone going through something and I know it's not that much to worry about or shouldn't really do certain things I see people doin'. You can get it another way that's positive. I help somebody out, I ain't got no problem widdit. I love helping people, it's one thing I like to do.

- Messengers as Intermediaries

A repeated theme in our interviews and informal discussion with DYRS staff is that because the messengers are not direct employees of the agency and lack legal authority over the

youth, they can play the role of intermediary, for instance, when youth are in abscondence the messengers often convince the youth to turn themselves in.

“the youth know that they can call me and I can come talk to them and get them a sandwich without me reporting their location. Then I have the opportunity to talk things out with them and figure out a solution that keeps them safe and gets them out of abscondence.”

On several occasions, youth have been in abscondence from group homes or other situations where youth felt endangered or mistreated by the staff. The messengers in those situations have served as intermediaries between the youth and the group home or family setting in order to resolve conflict. On other occasions, conflict is not resolved and DYRS staff and messengers come to the conclusion that different placement is needed. The intermediary role applies to problems related to drug -use. Messengers can have a heart- to -heart with the youth without having to report their drug use. The area is ambiguous. If they put the encounter and mention knowledge of drug use in FamCare, the youth's official electronic case notes, it might require the agency to act.

Messengers also negotiated with care coordinators on the consequences of abscondence. If they felt that the youth's abscondence was a temporary aberration or the result of a legitimate grievance they would advocate against harsh administrative sanctions for the abscondnee. The abscondence coordinator reports that the messengers have played an enormously positive role in getting young people to voluntarily end their behavior in this regard.

- Messengers in conflict with care coordinators

Messengers complained about not being told of team decision meetings by care coordinators. We heard about this in interviews with almost every messenger but we are unable to calculate the frequency without more solid evidence. When attending the meetings some messengers believed that their input was not welcome and made comments like the following:

“The decisions about the youth were made before I got there.”

“The meeting was just for show.”

“The coordinator told me what was going to be done.”

“I shouldn't waste my time.”

Another messenger said that care coordinators were mandated to make every last effort before removing a youth from his or her home with such placements to be used as a last resort. This resulted in supervisors overruling decisions made at T.D.M. meetings. However, there were also messengers who advocated for youth to be removed from the home. Thus,

messengers' approaches to using punitive sanctions were varied. There were also occasions when messengers advocated removing the youth from the community for their own safety with of being both victims and perpetrators.

Regular conflict has existed over the use of flex funds. These funds are to be used when the youth face critical needs for example clothing or bedding. CM.'s have regularly complained that these requests are either processed too slowly or rejected arbitrarily, as one stated: "The coordinators act like it is their money and they can say yes or no depending on how they feel." Two program coordinators reported that they have used their funds to provide immediate needs when they get tired of waiting for the care coordinator to act. DYRS leaders have responded by streamlining the process and mandating strict turn-around deadlines

Parental Experiences

All the parents interviewed expressed strong satisfaction with the program, reporting close and trusting relationships with their children's credible messengers. They thought that this extra level of support in homes that were often under financial and social duress, was extremely helpful as they worked to reintegrate their children back into the family. Parents also expressed appreciation for the level of services provided by DYRS and generally saw their relationships with the agency as respectful and reflecting a set of institutional practices in which both the community and its children were considered partners. Our impression was that the program helped parents to gain more confidence in dealing with this state agency, viewing it as a multivalent resource in their struggles against adversity. Below are five major themes that came through the data.

- Having trust in the mentor

Parents spoke highly of the credible messenger mentors in their children's lives and how well they could not only relate to their off-spring but to themselves. For them it was extremely important that these third parties who had such access to their family life were recognized as fellow community members who had been through similar urban experiences as both the parents and their children. As the parent below concludes, her son's mentor can relate to him and draw close to him precisely due to their shared understanding of the environment. This insider knowledge is much appreciated by this parent and many others and is in contrast to the often touted "expertise" of outsiders who might boast impressive credentials but do not have that organic relationship to the community.

"R:... usually when there's a specific issue with him we'll talk to his mentor because his mentor and him are very close, they have a great relationship. His mentor have a better understanding of inner-city youth, he's from the city, so he can reach him."

- Reducing worry and parental stress

Being a parent in the inner-city is no easy task and raising children in environments with high levels of crime and violence is especially challenging. The worry and stress for parents seems to be a constant until the child is old enough to take care of him or herself, and due to the highly levels of victimization especially among young black males it is not surprising to hear the words of concern from this mother. As she sees and feels it, “trouble” is always lurking on her parental journey and it is with great relief that she knows her son is safe when he is with his mentor and other young members of the DYRS “family.”

“I’m happy because I don’t have to sit by my phone and be afraid of what that phone call is goin’ to be... Whereas in the past that was my thing. If the phone ring in the middle of the night I was afraid because I was thinkin’ “ok he done got into some type of trouble,” somethin’ happened to him, um, I don’t have those worries anymore because I know he’s, normally with his mentor a lot, his mentor and a group of his peers are always most likely together, either with group or some type of outing with the programs...”

- Turning to the agency for material resources

With poverty so high among the families of youth, reflecting the general level of immiseration among the lower social classes of Washington D.C. (currently X% are in poverty) and the parlous condition of the welfare state in the U.S. more generally, the parent below lists the wide range of resources she can access through her son’s credible messenger and care coordinator. These services reflect the holistic nature of the initiative and the approach of DYRS to its task of youth rehabilitation. In this quote we see the agency making good on its promises to its community members and living up to its ideals. Such evidence of the agency’s commitment to the community is crucial for building and sustaining a relationship of trust and mutual support.

R: ...like, school uniforms, if he needs a coat, if he needs shoes, things like that, he always lets me know “don’t hesitate to ask, because it’s part of our responsibility to help you get whatever it is that he needs.” So that’s usually the type of things that I can go to him about, um, whether it be, you know, if I say, if I feel like, ok my son needs a drug program, he’ll say “ok, well we have a group, or we have a program that we work with,” um “this is the days that he should be there, this is the times that he should be there,” um “there’s workforce development, for the job, these are the days he should be there,” so those are the type of things I use the care coordinator for, um, and the mentor is usually my go-to person for um, just keepin’ him grounded, uh, or you know, just sayin’ “hey, you know, [unclear name]’s not in a good mood today, can you kinda see what’s goin’ on he’s not talkin’ to me.” So, yeah.

- The importance of another adult voice

The mother below makes an important point regarding the dynamics of adult authority involved in parenting. In this instance the credible messenger is seen to play multiple roles in support of parent-child relationships ranging from mediating between a mother and her son to providing that other adult voice that can sometimes reach the child when the parent's voice is either not being heard or having the opposite effect to that intended.

"...mentors can almost be like peers, so to speak you know what I mean, especially the ones that have overcome the same things, they know, they've been on those front lines, they know exactly what it is the kids are feeling, so they can have a better trusting relationship, where there's no judgement on the kid, not saying that we as parents judge them, but we do have these expectations of them as our children because we're raising them and it's like "hey, look this is not what we do here," and versus, you know mentors they're gonna be like "you know," they can intercede for how the parents feel, and how the kids can't understand why the parents say this."

- A place to release my stress and receive social support

Some parents looked forward to their group meetings for multiple reasons. It could be a place to rest and enjoy some respite from the household, an opportunity to meet other parents in a supportive environment as well as mix with agency staff, and a convivial space where food and refreshments are always served, experiences are shared, advice is offered to others and encouragement is happily received. This parent compares what is available now to the lack of services for parents in previous years, a time when she could only rely on the support and social solidarity of fellow parents.

Respondent: Um, let me see, I had a place to go, ah, to release um, my anger, my emotions, my hurt. Uh, my ups and downs, my roller coaster, and back then, um, what the parents have now in BYS, I didn't have. We didn't have this wraparound service support. So, all we had was each other, the parents, who came into a group, who shared our strengths, hope and experience, and we cried together.

Several parents reported that seeing their children get help inspired them to get help. In one of our focus groups a parent discussed recognized that environmental stressors had led to her suffering severe anxiety. She reported that her family engagement specialist encouraged her to seek therapeutic help. *"Talking to a therapist has helped me cope, I always worried that if you talked to therapist that means you're crazy - my therapist makes me feel that my worries are normal."* Another women in the focus group responded by *saying* *"listening to you makes me want to get help too."* In general parents reported that both groups and individual support made them feel less isolated. Recognizing that other parents struggled with the same parenting issues normalized their experience. A common theme in parental discussions was

how to protect their youth and themselves from the violence in their communities. In several cases parents discussed how to deal with a child whose behavior was putting the whole family at risk. Sometimes the parents thought that sending the youth to new beginnings or job corps was a way of making the family safer.

Several groups assisted parents in exploring vocational options. Workshops were held in resume writing, job interview skills, goal setting, and job readiness skills. Parents were brought to job fairs and career development workshops.

Care Coordinators and Case Managers

The interaction between the care -coordinators, who are the first line of service provision to the youth within D.Y.R.S, and the Credible Messengers, is key to the success of the initiative. All committed youth in D.R.Y. S. are assigned a care coordinator. All committed youth that are back in the community are assigned to one of six providers. This means that the youth all interface with care coordinators and case managers which makes the interaction between them of key importance. Formally, case managers had primary duties including supervising the youth and maintaining regular contact with them. Currently, with all DYRS youth living in the community being assigned to a Credible Messenger provider, roles and responsibilities of care coordinators have been redefined in terms of everyday practice within the agency. They have the power to recommend the removal of youth from the community and their transfer to a facility or a group home. However, role division remains ambiguous and there is often conflict and confusion over the jurisdiction and responsibilities of each group. Institutional resistance is a normal occurrence when an agency implements major changes in policy procedures and practices. However, it can also be a byproduct of internal divisions and contradictions within the relevant communities, where, for instance, the formerly incarcerated were also part of the problem they are now involved in solving.

In April of 2018 care coordinators were retrained and presented with a new manual containing new operating procedures. The manual outlines procedures for integrating the role of credible messengers into plans for serving the youth and their families. However, the credible messenger staff training manual does not contain training or provide operating procedures as to how the messengers should interact with the care coordinators.

Most case managers had social work degrees although there are people with counseling and criminal justice degrees. There were different orientations among the case managers in relationship to their criminal justice function. Several of the case managers saw their job as protecting their community and rehabilitating youth. Others saw their primary duty as serving the youth and insuring that young people were an educational and vocational path that would lead them living pro-social lives. For the case managers with more of a criminal justice orientation there was a higher level of resistance to the initiative.

- Famcare:

FamCare is the case notes system of DYRS used by the entire agency. Many workshops have been devoted to FamCare and is one of the ways that the messengers and coordinators communicate. Some but not all providers have staff -time devoted to editing or writing notes for other messengers. Care coordinators utilize a language steeped in professional terms and concepts whereas messengers' FamCare notes are inconsistent in the degree to which they rely on professional terms and exemplify a professional orientation. Nonetheless, the situation is changing as messengers are becoming more experienced and receive more training.

Both the messengers and the coordinators prefer to be less involved in writing notes. As one of the respondents put it:

“I want to be out there talking to kids saving lives not documenting stuff that doesn't matter”

Care coordinators felt that the youth would benefit if FamCare and other documentation took up less time.

“I feel like forty percent of my time is spent on paperwork. At the same time DYRS is telling us that we should spend more time in the field meeting with kids and families.”

- Positive attitudes toward the CMMI:

For care coordinators there was a range of reactions to the credible messenger initiative, from welcoming and appreciative, to the skeptical or dismissive. Those welcoming the initiative talked about caseloads and the difficulty of supporting youth in crisis when their jobs are nine -to -five:

“there were kids we could have saved if we had the services of a credible messenger”

“I see them as support, not competition”

“They are our eyes and ears in the community. When I listen to the youth I have to feel in the blanks and speculate about what is happening in the family or on the street. Now a lot of my guess work is eliminated and together we can plan an intervention that has a much better chance of success”

For these care coordinators there was a sense that the agency could be strengthened, and their own personal effectiveness could be enhanced by the added knowledge and support of the messengers. In particular, they saw the availability of the messengers to respond immediately to crises as a significant contribution at every stage of the reintegration process

and understood it to be a distinctly different type of service than what the coordinators were able to provide.

“Knowing that there is someone who can immediately defuse situations and talk kids down from making a mistake is great. It means we can keep kids in their homes and their communities and keep them alive”

- Skeptical or negative attitudes toward CMMI:

However, some care coordinators felt disrespected by the title Credible Messenger and doubted the effectiveness, professionalism and/ or the integrity of these co-workers. Differences in occupational status can explain some of these tensions along with the stigma by which the formerly incarcerated continue to be burdened. For some, it was difficult to see messengers in a completely different light from their past behavior and identities. As in the unfiltered reaction of one respondent:

“I am from the community, I have fought the pimps and the dealers to reclaim my neighborhood for decent people, now some of these same hustlers are credible and I am not? What a joke.”

And a similar complaint is aired by the following two respondents who couched their perceived differences more in terms of professional knowledge, credentials, expertise and accountability:

“The youth need support rooted in evidence-based practice from professionals that have diagnostic skills and a strong background in cognitive -behavioral skills and trauma treatment modalities. Charisma and street knowledge are what sent these folks to prison and now it supposed to keep the youth out of prison. I would much prefer that the youth are mentored by adults that are hard-working decent people. That can mean professionals that have made it out of the community, but it can also mean a store owner or a school custodian. I object to the idea that ex-cons are best suited to mentor our youth”

“I am a licensed professional, when I sign off on something my license is on the line. My decisions must be guided by the law, professional, and familiarity with best practices. When a messenger makes a decision all he has on the line is his ego. If the kid screws up he will blame the kid not his own bad judgments. No matter what the kid does or doesn't do every one of my judgments has to stand up to agency procedures and the law.”

No doubt feeling some of these tensions, one messenger gave a response that was widely shared by many of his colleagues:

“Some of these case managers, they think they know stuff because they have been to school... but they haven't ever attended the university of the streets!”

It might be noted that we felt that these tensions were not limited to the differences between care coordinators and messengers. For example, the differences in occupational experience and perhaps status within the ranks of the messengers could also be an issue when we consider that slightly more than half of the messengers are returning citizens while many have no criminal record, and several have advanced degrees.

- Sources of harmony

At the same time, we see progress in the willingness of an increasing portion of care coordinators to treat credible messengers as colleagues and allies. Two factors are involved: first, the attrition of case managers and care coordinators who left or were pushed out because of their unwillingness to work with the messengers and adopt the new approach to the youth as required of them; second, many of the coordinators have built up a relationship of trust, interdependency and reliance with the credible messengers.

“At first I was dubious. But then messengers helped me with kids in a number of ways. Several kids in abscondence were brought back into the program by messengers. Messengers have provided me with useful information that I don't think I could have obtained on my own.”

This sense of more harmony between the two groups has been helped by the recruitment of new staff and the initiation of monthly meetings between the supervisors of care coordinators and the coordinators for each of the providers to ensure that problems between messengers and coordinators are immediately addressed, and proactive procedures can be developed to avert conflicts.

- The dialectical relationship between care coordinators and the credible messengers:

The care coordinators who are committed to the initiative utilized the messengers in a variety of ways. For example, messengers may have access to information that the care coordinators do not because the youth recognize that the legal obligations of the care coordinators may require that they report illegal activity or the potential for violence. It should be noted that the Director of DYRS has consistently affirmed the goal of keeping youth in the community wherever and however possible. The coordinators recognized that the messengers can help them reach this goal and with greater cooperation between messengers and care coordinators, the information flows between the two groups increase in both directions. As a result, coordinators reported that they have gained a greater insight into

the youths' family dynamics, living situation, school experience, and intimate relationships. One example of this was when a child is not attending school or is having problems related to school, the care coordinator may seek the help of a messenger.

Thus, care coordinators and messengers tended to work well together with youth on school related issues. Messengers and coordinators have cooperated in getting youth the documents they need to enroll in school. When the coordinator- messenger relationship hasn't worked there has been a difficulty obtaining the coordinators assistance in obtaining documents. Messengers, especially in the first year complained about getting the necessary documents for a driver's license, working papers, transcripts or a social security card only to discover that care coordinators had the necessary documents and were withholding them for unknown reasons.

- Problems with mental health

Care coordinators and credible messengers were in agreement that youth did not have access to sufficient or quality mental health services. The network of providers that D.C. provides indigent youth and their families are generally seen as inadequate. However, it was noted that with the arrival of Dr. Key a totally new regime of mental health care was being put in place.

"These are check collectors not therapists"

"These therapists may be okay for middle-class people but they lack the cultural competence to work with our youth."

"I spent weeks talking to a young woman about getting help with trauma. She was the victim of violence and abuse and had witnessed horrible violence. When I finally got her to go she was completely unable to establish a rapport with the guy."

Several care coordinators and one of the supervisors thought that therapeutic services should be provided directly by DYRS Youth and their families are resistant to the youth receiving mental health services; they fear the stigma attached to having a diagnosis and have no faith in the providers. If the therapists were linked to the care coordinators and the CM.s they would not seem like strangers. It would also lead to better information services and team planning if therapists were part of our team.

- Problems with flex funds

One area that has been an impediment to the messengers providing support to the youth and their families has been access to flex funds. These funds may be distributed to the youth in their families when there is a pressing financial need for something that is essential to the

families functioning. The family is on the verge of eviction, the youth needs clothes or a uniform to attend school, the family does not have enough food. According to many of the messengers the care coordinators have been slow to approve requests and have denied requests without explanation. When the requests are denied one of the supervisors in care coordination reviews the request. When this was brought to the attention of DYRS leadership procedures were clarified and procedures for expediting requests were developed. CM.'s have reported an improvement in helping youth and their families obtain flex funds but have stated that it still often takes more than the three days for processing requests contained in the updated procedures. Care coordinator supervisors have tried to improve the process and encourage their staff to be more responsive to the need of the youth and their families.

Family Engagement Specialists and Family Groups

Family engagement specialists (to be referred to as specialists) led family support groups that provide social and emotional support to the families of committed and post-committed DYRS youth. Family support groups involved family members from infancy to grandparents while older siblings, aunts, cousins as well as custodial and non-custodial parents attended. All of the six providers had family groups. An older program called Anchored in Strength preceded the family groups but was for DYRS family and staff. When provider groups did not work for families or family members wanted additional support they were referred to Anchored in Strength. Families have also gone to retreats sponsored by Anchored in Strength. These retreats provided families with massages, meditation and time for reflection. For some families it represented their first vacation in years. One family engagement specialist reported on some of the challenges facing the organization of family groups:

“...looking at the other parents, because they work too, I think some of the parents just make excuses they just want a little bit of help, and then when it come down to the real help, like the support groups, is really a big piece of the help. So I think when it come down to that, a lot of them make excuses. But they want the other type of help. So the other type of help is they want to enjoy the trips, the gift cards, the activities, but this is the real big piece of the help... it's been going on two years. I've been trying to get my parents to come out to these support groups and she has been the only one...”

We interviewed parents, family engagement specialists, and observed family support groups and the Anchored in Strength group. The groups served multiple functions and had multiple benefits as follows:

- Family Normalization:

Families began to feel that their situation has being normalized. Feelings of anger, hurt, fear, confusion and ambivalence were openly expressed. Discussing these feelings and experiences with others helped families to see their issues in a broader perspective and as something that is more relative than absolute. Such sharing works against the individualization of such experiences, which often promotes feelings of paralysis and fatalism.

- The Sharing of Information:

Family members shared information about services, available job opportunities, and the quality of schools.

- Breaking down Isolation:

Groups helped adult caretakers of youth feel less isolated. For some the group was the only time they left their home and/or their immediate neighborhood. By sharing these deep felt experiences family members felt less isolated and by sharing information adults they felt supported by one another.

- Groups engaged in practical problem solving.

Two groups obtained family members credit reports and wrote challenge letters if the reports were inaccurately. Question of how to obtain and build credit were explored. Many of the group members were entirely unfamiliar with credit reports and lacked financial literacy. These groups and other groups have helped families gain financial literacy, competence, and confidence. "Now when someone offers me a lay away plan or a buy now pay later plan, I know how to look at interest rates and total costs and make a good decision.

- Planning the future:

Collages were made describing that represented short- and long-term goals for their clients. There were vocational goals relational goals and housing goals. The process of working toward these goals is regularly revisited.

- Youth/Parent collaboration:

Each group discussed the impact of absence in the life of the members. In the parents' group there was a recognition of how the impact of absence in their life had shaped the ways that they parented their children and grandchildren. Each of the parents and grandparents made a contract describing the ways in which they were committed to be present in the lives of the youth. Youth engaged in the same exercise and contracted for the ways that would be present in the lives of their families. The contracts receive regular review in both groups providing an opportunity to discuss ways to strengthen family bonds.

- Lessening the stress levels:

One way of lessening stress levels for parents was to make them familiar with recreational and cultural possibilities outside of their immediate neighborhood while encouraging them to develop stronger bonds with other group members. There were also trips to museums, boat rides, visits to spas, and picnics. Such activities helped remove the stigma of being families of committed youth. Family members reported that in the past they felt blamed, judged and punished for the offenses of their youth. The outings increased group solidarity, giving families the sense of being nurtured and supported.

- Promotion of Safety:

Adults discussed the issue of the safety for the youth and for the families as a whole. An ongoing issue was whether the youth and or the families were better off with the youth in placement. Families frequently discussed their fears about young people. Discussions of safety generally involved changing the youth's behavior or removing them and their family from the danger. What follows is a composite of responses on the theme of safety taken from several group meetings:

"Sometimes I feel like my child would be better off at New Beginnings or in a group home out of D.C. He is with the wrong kind of people where I live. They are the same group a kids doing the same stuff that he got into trouble for. They haven't changed. How is he gonna change? I worry about him more now that he is under my roof then back when he was at New beginnings."

"My son too. When we were coming up you didn't have to worry about all this gun play. I don't want to let the kids out. They are going to go out anyway. No Knives, no fists No fair fighting- Just killing. One boy down the block, sixteen-he is an a wheelchair."

Another parent chimed in:

"There are boys looking for my son. My son's CM. always is trying to talk him out of nonsense. He is at New Beginnings now, I fear from coming home, I fear for him and for all of us."

The facilitator asks, *"What can we do to keep the youth safe?"*

"I want to move, long as we are here, we are surrounded by trouble."

Administrators

The administrators interviewed provided thoughtful, critical, introspective responses regarding their experiences and roles within the implementation of the CMMI. Their responses were candid, describing in detail their various achievements vis a vis the program, the institution and their own growth and evolution as institutional leaders. Meanwhile they also quite openly discussed the program's limitations, their own personal challenges in their leadership roles, and the issues they encountered in bringing about change to different aspects of both occupational and institutional cultures, bearing in mind they were hired specifically to contribute to a state agency in transition. In general, they spoke positively and enthusiastically about the program's successes in meeting its goals and sometimes even exceeding them. Most of the self-criticism of the program related to the need for more training of credible messengers, a more rigorous process of recruitment, a more effective way of communicating expectations as well as shortcomings to staff, and a better understanding of the different though complementary roles of the credible messengers and the care coordinators. Given the many positive developments within the agency since the introduction of CMMI the future of the program seemed assured in the views of all the interviewees. However, what the future of the program might look like in more exact terms did not provoke much discussion except for two areas of the program's extension: the establishment of transitional housing (referred to as healing housing) and the use of credible messengers either as violence interrupters or in support of such interventions. Interviewees gave little indication of complacency, recognizing the importance of maintaining the program's momentum by building on the lessons learned, the need for the program's stability in terms of funding, program development, the retention of experienced credible messengers and the recruitment of new ones.

- **Field Observations**

Youth Groups:

Groups for the youth met once or twice a week, depending on the provider. The providers took youth on trips to amusement parks, video arcades, and trips to substitute for the groups. The groups covered the pillars contained in the covenant of peace to reinforce the values and practices supported by the covenant. These groups assisted the youth in problem solving, values clarification and life skills while supporting positive youth development. There was no fixed curriculum for the groups although the pillars served as themes for group discussions. Youth participation was not mandatory, although strongly encouraged. Meals were served for the youth and were either catered and purchased from restaurants or cooked at the providers facility.

There was some disagreement about the ideal size of a group in which members talked about their lives. Certainly, the format, activities and the goals of the group were factors to consider vis a vis group size, which varied from 2-18 youth and family participants while the

number of messengers participating ranged from 2-6. Although most groups averaged four to six messengers. All of the messengers were expected to attend and drove most of the participants to and from the meetings. This is considered to be necessary because members feared traveling through territories they considered to be dangerous with potentially hostile group members sometimes residing in group homes in Maryland, far from the locations where group meetings were held. A problem in the majority of groups observed was that messengers often constituted more than 1/3 of the participants. Another issue was that the voice of the credible messengers dominated or loomed large in group discussions. If the messengers were there to facilitate, then clearly only one or two were necessary. However, if the messengers were there to talk about their own experience and provide the wisdom of experience, then that needs to be incorporated into the group design.

In terms of youth participation. The larger the group, the harder it was to be vulnerable and discuss deeply felt personal matters. This is not an absolute rule since at the large circle during the Covenant of Peace some young people readily opened up. In groups with more than five youth participants and multiple credible messenger participants it was regularly the case that some of the youth did not speak except for the check-in that occurs at the beginning. If the group discussion lasted one hour it was difficult for each youth to explore an issue fully if the group was large.

Friends and family members have attended many of the groups. While this speaks to the group being a source of community, it raised several issues. Perhaps members should decide if the group is open or closed. This may be particular to the topics to be discussed at a given meeting or it may be based on group dynamics. The benefits of different modes of group membership each should be explored. There are groups where the youth have a deep familiarity with one another and other groups where the members do not know some of the other members.

Certainly, people come because good food is served and people are hungry. Some of the groups have purchased containers that make it possible to bring meals home and helping to feed people is an important community action. Some of the participants who live in group homes prefer the food served in the group to the food provided by the group home.

One group involved three generations from one family. The grandmother spoke about her desire to help her from recovery. Her grandson spoke about how his mother and his mentor were models for him now, as he stated: *"I did not get to choose who my father was, I am choosing to make my relationship with my mentor work."*

Getting members to group can be an issue. The youth often feel uncomfortable traveling through other neighborhoods especially when there have been recent tensions between their neighborhood and a nearby neighborhood. Youth that reside in group homes also may have

long distances to travel, which may involve almost hour-long rides from Suburban Maryland. In both cases the credible messengers have used giving rides as an opportunity to have a dialog with the youth.

Processes of the Groups:

We spent many months attending groups, observing the individual and group dynamics of these meetings and in particular the part played by the seven “pillars” which are the principles upon which a successful reintegration processes can be gauged. Each group has a facilitator who is either a credible messenger or one of the youth. The plan for their group is either devised by the credible messengers or the youth. After the group forms a circle the talking piece can be any object although often the object is endowed with a symbolic meaning. The talking piece is passed clockwise or counter-clockwise. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak. The reason for circulating the talking piece is to give every member the chance to speak. In practice, often the piece is passed to members who want to speak or members the facilitator wants to hear from. At other times the piece circulates without the facilitator directing its flow, allowing everyone to participate. In the following are the summaries of our observational field notes of both the “check-ins” and the role and impact of the seven pillars.

Arriving and Becoming Comfortable

Youth travel into group from various wards from across the district. Oftentimes youth are transported to group by their Credible Messenger. Upon arrival is youth often engage with one another in an open and honest format. Many of the group sessions serve warm food and provide drinks and sometimes dessert. All youth participants shared that they look forward to having a meal at the group session. Many of the youth mentioned the meal served at group being their first hot meal of the day. Beyond the meal, youth feel safe in the group sessions. Safe to share among their peers, credible messengers and other present participants.

What follows is a composite of responses on the theme of gratitude taken from several youth group meetings:

“The food is always good. We had tacos the other week. That’s my favorite. I take a plate home for later and I bring one back for baby sis. They be hooking us up. This group the truth.”

“I could spell the food from outside. It make you wanna come inside. This the only time I sit down and eat. I’m on the go a lot so I don’t sit and eat and talk. Not even at school. Its better to sit and eat cause you digest your food better. My mentor told me that. He said he was always on the go eating and that’s not how you want to live life. He said when he was

locked up he had to eat fast and that messed him up for life. Look at him over there eating all fast. Let me go tell him to slow down.”

This leisure talk that happened prior to the start of every session, while awaiting for group participants to arrive was important for the youth. In these spaces they were able to shed the expectations of the streets and relax a bit. In a way they were able to act their age. They weren't forced to be something they are not because the surroundings were safe and the expectations were set by the youth themselves.

During group sessions, especially those taking place in a home setting, youth enter and exit the space at their leisure. In these home environments youth were greeted with an open-door policy. In this sense, group sessions mirrored a healthy home setting. Inclusive of such things as, food, welcoming space, and a family vibe. As numerous youth enter the home, you could hear:

“Hey y'all. I'm here! I know y'all was waiting on me. This was followed with loud laughter”.

“I hope yall ain't eat up all the food. I'm hungry as hell”.

“I was waiting for this all day. Let me be the first one in line. I'm pregnant and feeding two”.

Before the discussion youth enjoyed one another's company and no topic was off the table. Youth talked about school life, family life, community life and the life they desired to live in the future.

School topics, typically consisted of commentary around fights, gang rivals and “baby mama drama”. The following quotes capture the sentiment of these conversations:

“They were fighting afterschool and the cops came real quick. Everybody started running but I stayed to see what was really good. I was waiting on my mentor to pick me up anyway so I wasn't going nowhere”.

“My mother was pissed with me for being prego [pregnant]. She wanted me to finish school then go to college. She said since I was young, she would kick me out on the street if I ever had a baby on her. But she know she love me. Plus, I would just go to me mentor house or my bestie place.

Sometimes a few mentors would engage with the youth in these informal conversations, but it was less about advising them and more about listening. These group observations make it clear that youth come to group with a lot to discuss with one another as well as with credible messengers, family members and other participants.

Discussion Format: Restorative Circles for Open Engagement

The formal group dialogue that followed the informal eating and discussion session was the programmatic component of youth groups. This part of the session utilizes the restorative circle format (which is the traditional format of the covenant of peace debriefing sessions).

Upon arrival all seats are arranged in a circle and this allows for each participant to be seen and heard. Once inside the circle things were much more formal. With the circle came rules. For example, you would only be allowed to talk if you had the talking piece in your hand. The talking piece was passed around the circle and assured that everyone had an opportunity to engage in their fair share of dialogue. All participants of the group were aware of the rules. This allowed for the conversation to begin as soon as everyone was seated in the circle.

Check-ins

At the beginning of each meeting members are asked to state their emotional temperature on a scale of 1-10 and to explain the number. Often the check-in is an opportunity to introduce new members and gauge where each individual fits on the scale. A score of one meant that you were not feeling so great and a ten meant completely satisfied. If youth have accomplishments that they wish to share or just share good feelings this becomes an opportunity to do so. Many youth shared their accomplishment in school, at work or within a sport and everyone clapped and praised them.

It was rare is for one of the youths to indicate unhappiness or dissatisfaction. This is not to say that this was not the case, but youth often shared higher numbers on the scale. These numbers corresponded with feeling of joy and happiness, which sometimes was the opposite of feeling projected in the faces and energy of youth participants. On occasion, youth discussed losing a friend or a family member being ill. This sharing led to participants starting to discuss the difficulties of such an experience. Youth opened up in very dynamic ways, both inside and outside of the circle. This was a clear sign of their sense of safety and security during youth group sessions.

In instances where participants chimed in on another youth's check-in was very informative. Youth were supportive of one another in their way to share similar experiences. The sharing of common situations connected them to one another and served as a reminder for all participants that they were more common than they may have initially thought.

Within this safe space, credible messengers also felt comfortable sharing with the larger group what a mentee may have told them. There were more than a few times when a credible messenger would "out" one of the youth, revealing to the group how the youth is

“really” doing, while assuring him or her that there is support here. In other words, reminding them of the reason they were all there in the first place. Naturally, the youth when encouraged enough would take on the underlying issues and other times they would remain silent. It is important to note that while in the circle, a youth participant had the freedom to pass on their opportunity to talk. If they had nothing to add to the circle or simply did not wish to address the topic of discussion, they would not be forced to talk or shamed for passing the “talking piece” to the participant right next to them.

When not done correctly, the check-in could become a ritual that is moved through quickly and does not have much substance. Credible messengers rarely claim to be feeling other than a nine or ten which could be viewed as a superficial response or even somewhat problematic. It was witnessed in a few sessions where a credible messenger started the check-in with a high number and all the youth that followed seemed to have similar numbers. It could be assumed from this observation that everyone was having great days but realistically speaking everyone has at least one bad day. The interest twist to this scenario is that when a youth digs deep and speaks about difficulty and unhappiness, other youth also dig deep and share similar kinds of narratives. With this in mind, it is very important that youth continue to be comfortable sharing their honesty. This means that good and bad circumstances should be explored. This would allow mentors to provide advice and direction during and after group. It would also open the door for the youth to learn how to work through their difficulties in a healthy fashion. Some youth shared their joy with bearing witness to their own growth, especially in the face of adversity. One youth captured this in his statement below sharing his reflection about a serious argument phase with his mother:

“I finally realized that my mother was right. I should respect her more. I should respect myself more. Me and my mom was beefing for like a month. Usually me, I be the one that keeps it going. I was petty like that. If I’m mad then you gone be mad. Hearing from all you make me see something I never saw. I see that my mom deserve better. I deserve better. All my moms did for me. She never put me in no home. She never really kicked me out. Even when she did she would give me money and say make sure you eat. Even when she mad she cared. I have a lot I need to work on. I need to do the work on me so I could see my mom for the angel she been. I ain’t saying she not wrong for some stuff she do. I’m saying if I do my part that all I can do”.

When this was shared in the group, it caused other participants to tear up. As a result, some of the other youth participants went to grab tissues from the bathroom. It was teamwork taking place organically. The mentor commented on what the youth shared. The credible messenger spoke to the youth as if he was the only one in the room. There was direct eye-contact and the intensity in the room increased. There was a feeling of urgency in that air:

“I am so happy to hear you say that. I just want to cry. You have been so hard for so long, I never thought you would get it. God gives you one mother and no matter what you have to treat her with all the patience you got inside you. She brought you into this world. She could take you out.”

Formal Group Discussion: Exercises Revolving Around to the Seven Pillars

Many groups have focused on relationships with friends, partners and families. The treatment of females by their partners has been the source of heated and productive discussions in which many young men have asserted the right to a double standard. Females present have been quick to challenge such assertions. Sometimes the facilitator is able to slow things down to avoid shouting matches. Such talking pieces may or may not be allowed to continue depending on the level of intensity in such discussions. The following is an example of one such an exchange:

Credible Messenger: “None of you like it when your parents cheated, or left, or fought. Do you want to repeat that stuff?”

Male Youth: “I am going to do for me. I am not about taking care of her or anyone else, no one else is going to take care of me.”

Female Youth: “Not with that attitude, why would anyone take care of you? Maybe you are used to not trusting and taking advantage. Is that how you want to live your whole life?”

It is important to draw on the components of the Covenant of Peace (the Covenant) that provided specific programming for female youth by female facilitators. A healthy debate between male and female youth can be productive in many ways, but if not facilitated correctly could damage the strength of relationships built through youth group engagements. As such, those groups that had girl talk that allowed for female voices to surface and lead the dialogue are just as important as male voices being centered, heard and respected.

The Seven Pillars

The pillars are created to provide criminal justice involved youth with an understanding of the core aspects needed in order to lead a safe, healthy and productive lifestyle. These pillars are the backbone of The Covenant of Peace and serve as a compass for Credible Messengers as they provide intensive mentoring for youth and their families.

The seven pillars of the covenant can be found throughout the Credible Messenger Initiative. From the facilitators guide to actual in-house programming, these seven pillars are a constant throughout the process, from start to finish.

• *My Word is My Bond.*

This pillar challenges youth to understand the importance of keeping your word and the value of integrity. Within this pillar youth are informed about the importance of doing what you say you are going to do. Furthermore, youth are introduced to the strength of integrity and building one's character to be exemplary.

When to keep your word and when not to can lead to a great deal of discussion and debate. Credible messengers and youths debated the morality of when it is acceptable to lie or break promises. The group process usually involved sharing a hypothetical situation, you promise to keep the secret and your friend tells you they are going to kill someone. You swear loyalty to a gang and they want to beat someone that is a witness in a case to scare them. In every group that we observed people moved from the hypothetical to the real. The youth also discussed the issue of trust. They discussed the pain of parents violating their word and how friends broke their word. It seemed that there was almost universal agreement that there were situations where you can violate the bond but not on the specifics of when.

These discussions provided the opportunity to engage in value clarification and provided the opportunity for collective problem-solving. One of the youth promised his incarcerated older brother that he would look after his mother. The mother was abusive and neglectful and regularly brought violent men into the house. The group encouraged the youth to talk to his brother and explain the situation and that the youth could still support his mother but from the safety of his grandfather's home.

A common problem discussed was the hurt that happened when parents broke their bond which was often tied to the act of forgiveness. For example, several youths responded to this theme as follows:

"I can forgive my father for all the times he promised to be there for birthdays and other stuff, but I can't and won't trust him"

"Parents are different than kids. They are grown-ups. There should be a different standard for them than us. Besides maybe we break our word because we have learned from their example."

"I am never going to lie to my child. It is different when you can't keep your word because life gets in the way versus you can't cause you don't want to. Lying is when you are not honest in the first place."

Related to this theme several activities were organized such as: (i) Youth were asked to put themselves in the position of someone with whom they have failed to keep their word; (ii) Tell someone how you feel when they have broken their word; and (iii) Apologize to someone when you have broken your word.

• *The Act of Forgiveness*

This pillar emphasizes the importance of forgiving in stopping the cycle of violence. Therefore, group programming is designed to inform the youth of the importance of forgiving themselves and others in order to heal and stop the cycle of violence. The Act of Forgiveness begins internally and moves to the outward. This concept must not only be felt, it must also be lived. As such, the true act of forgiveness becomes a lifestyle. All program participants engage with this pillar in dynamic ways. Exercises that address this pillar can become very emotionally taxing at times and it is important to never disconnect from the depth of what this pillar causes to emerge.

The act of forgiveness led to discussions about the wounds and trauma from friends and family. The group processes focused on self-healing, compassion, empathy, and understanding. Group members discharged a great deal of sadness and anger during these discussions. The process of forgiving others also involved letting go of self-blame. Many of the youths expressed a sense of guilt for the incarceration of or loss of a parent. However, hearing other people's stories had several consequences, similar to the process in the parent groups (see above). First, it normalized the experience, make the youth feel that they were not alone in either their experience or the feelings and beliefs that were a response. Second, it opened the floodgates to the release of many related stories. For example:

"My father promised he would never leave me after being in jail from when I was five to when I was 9. When he came out he said he would never leave me again. Ten months later he got caught selling and for possession of a firearm. He has been in since. I know he was trying to take care of his family but all it did was hurt us more. It is hard to forgive that."

Another youth asked whether you should blame him for everything that went wrong in the family. Other members argued about whether it was possible to blame and then forgive, stating: *"If people don't take responsibility for what they do, how can you forgive them?"*

Typical activities on this theme were: (i) Generate a list of people that you are angry at or have been disappointed by; then (ii) Answer the following questions: Have you forgiven them? and What do they need to do in order for you to forgive them.

• *My Family is My All*

This pillar brings youth back to the value and importance of family relationships and their role as leaders within the family structure. Therefore, group activities that are connected to this pillar are designed to inform males that they are to be leaders of their household. They are reminded of the impact they have on their family and that impact should be positive. Females are also reminded of their role within the family structure.

In addition, this pillar supports discussion of how to build and rebuild family relationships. For some of the youth that are estranged from their family it was an opportunity to talk about how to construct a new family or social network to replace a shattered family. Youth processed how to manage a family dynamic that may have shifted in their absence and continues to shift as the youth attempt to change their behavior and contribute to strengthening family. Many of the activities were linked to the other pillars, especially the act of forgiveness and the impact of absence. The youth are generally from single parent families with a significant percentage residing with a grandparent or an aunt or uncle. The youth strategized on how to repair family relationships, while many youth discharged feelings of shame and guilt as a result of violating the law.

On one occasion, a facilitator asked the youth to describe a conflict that repeats itself in their family:

“My family always fights about money. My older brother he's stingy. My mom asks him to do more to help.” The facilitator then asked: “How can B., who understands his brothers pride in earning a living, get him to do more for the family without feeling cheated.” A couple of youth role-played the situation based on instructions from the group.

Activities on this theme included the following questions and tasks: (i) Describe how you would like to see your family living in a year; (ii) If you could create the ideal family what would it look like? (iii) Write a letter to a family member where you apologize for something or that expresses sadness about your relationship with them.

- *The Power of the Tongue*

This pillar invites youth to explore the power of their voice, focusing on the potential of language as a source for positive transformation individually and collectively, e.g. the inner voice that may have been silenced but lives within us all. Through group exercises connected to this pillar, youth work to recognize how words can hurt, be helpful and/or be lost. It also emphasized the tremendous damage that can be inflicted by words and urged a more thoughtful and precise use of language.

In these exercises, youth recounted stories of being humiliated, saddened, exposed, and harmed by language. The power of language to uplift and transform was something the

youth seemed to be less cognizant of and it was much easier to recall language that was harmful and false than it was to recall truthful and beneficial words.

Activities on this theme included the following questions and tasks:

- Tell someone they have done something that you dislike without being accusatory or confrontational;
 - Think of words that made you angry and that you could have learned from or benefited from if they were said differently;
 - Give an example where you or somebody else was manipulated by words;
 - Imagine someone perfectly describing you what would you say? and
 - What would you do if you if someone made a Facebook post about sleeping with your sister and included pictures?
- *The Impact of Absence*

This pillar explores the experiences of loss and the hardship that accompanies parental or familial absenteeism. Activities connected to this pillar seek to critically engage youth in ways that lead to their ability to address the pain, loss and regret that accompanied the abuse and the neglect that often comes with trauma.

This pillar elicited more tears than any other topic. The youth often described losing friends and family members to violence. They discussed the pain of family abandoning them, family that died of natural causes and from substance abuse. The difficulty of having parents in and out of their lives as a result incarceration and reentry is another primary cause of absence. For example, youth typically responded in the following ways:

“One day I hope my father will make it to my birthday.”

“My grandmother was the only person that believed in me and loved me.”

“If my dad loved me, he would have been working, not hustling. Even when he was home, he was not really there.”

The pain of absence, the feeling of abandonment and betrayal were common themes in these discussions. Also, feelings of having been rejected or unwanted accompanied these feelings. The facilitators had a range of approaches to these issues. One technique involved role play and letter writing to air feelings about loss. Many of the youth were ambivalent about their losses, for example, *“Sometimes I wish my mom would stop using and be a mom, sometimes I hope she doesn't come back, things are better without her.”*

Facilitators encouraged people to look at both sides of their feelings, i.e., their hurt, anger, fear, hopes, and positive memories. Some sessions were devoted to grieving and honoring family members and friends. When youth talked about young people that have been victims of violence this often provoked rage, fear and sometimes self-hate, for example:

“How come we have to live like this. Kids in white neighborhoods don't have to worry about getting popped.”

“Every time I get in an argument on the street it is in the back of my head, do I want risk my life for this stupid...? Sometimes that thought makes me even angrier, like I am not be scared.”

Some youth honestly discussed the fears they have as a result of losing friends while other youth denied their feelings of fear and being at risk. Facilitators worked to help the young people to acknowledge these risks and used it as an opportunity to talk about youth changing their behavior both individually and collectively, for example:

“When I see that the killer and the victim look like they could have been brothers, it makes me feel like, hey we are all victims and we are all doing this to ourselves.”

In another exchange, one facilitator embraced the difficult theme of racial structuring and its reproduction:

“You are doing the K.K.K.s work for them. They are happy to see us doing fratricide... black brothers killing black brothers. They give you the guns, they give you the drugs, then they laugh when you kill each other or go to jail.”

One youth responded: *“How do we get out of this trap?”*

Another messenger answered. *“That is why we are here. Go to school. Get a career make money without having to watch your back.”*

Typical activities on this theme were the following: (i) Write a letter to someone that matters to you that is gone; (ii) Tell them how they mattered; (iii) Tell them how your life is changing; (iv) In groups of two talk about someone who is absent; and (v) Tell someone how you feel about them being absent.

- *My Life Matters*

This pillar highlights the awareness that when one life is destroyed, it is as if all of humanity is destroyed. Therefore, group programming under this pillar is designed to inform youth participants that the effect of one death has an effect on everyone, even those that one would

not typically consider. Not only are the victims and assailants' lives changed forever. Their parents, community and anyone else remotely connected to them are also affected. My Life Matters is a charge for youth to critically think and reflect upon all that life has to offer. Here youth are encouraged to think about the preciousness of their life as a means to caring more deeply about the lives of others.

This pillar is relevant to every other pillar and every topic of discussion. As one facilitator said:

"If you value your own life, then you will not want to devalue anyone another life. It is not just that shooting someone will put you in jail, it is that you realize they matter, their families matter."

Facilitators used this pillar to help to pull youth back from the brink of violence. In groups the idea that violence does not make you a man is frequently stressed. Questions were explored about how to avoid conflict and maintain dignity, while avoiding becoming a victim.

- *What Does Love Looks Like?*

This pillar is about helping youth to manifest love through their actions. Through this pillar young participants learn the characteristics of love and how to apply them accordingly.

This issue was explored in many of the groups and clearly overlaps with "my family is my all," "the impact of absence," and "my life matters." While all the pillars intersect one another to some extent, the discussion of "what love looks like" engenders pain around the betrayal of love or the loss of love, while it can also be used as a motivating force to encourage youth to let love inform their relationship with the lives of others and their own lives.

When youth were asked to imagine how love would be a part of their future, several talked about material love. The field observation below provides a typical example of how discussions around the "love" theme played out in group settings:

Youth: "I am going to love my house, my car, my money."

CM: "Who would be in your house enjoying your money?"

Youth: "Some girls I pay to be there"

CM: "Would that be all you could get? Paid love? Why aren't you entitled to real love?"

Youth: "What's that man. I don't get what that is, I have never seen it. Its always what people can get from you and what you get from the them. Anything else is B.S."

CM: "I have risked death for my family, and they have done the same for me... I understand you feel like no one has ever given you real love but can you start with you? Can you make your life matter and learn to love yourself?"

Youth: "I will think about that"

The messenger then asked if others were struggling with loving themselves and being loved by others. Several youths talked about betrayal and a lack of faith in love. Others talked about a parent or a grandparent who gave them love. Another youth piped up, *"I am tired of waiting for others. Waiting for my mom to stop using. She loves me but it's a love that is there when she is all there...not when she is on a mission to get a high. I love myself that is all I can guarantee. No one can take that away from me."*

Another young woman talked about her daughter,
"Look how much love she gets right here in this group (lots of young people hold her daughter and want to feed her). "I want her to be surrounded by positive people, people who will look out for her."

The messenger closed the session by pointing out that everyone in the group is loving toward the children of the group:

"We were all children once. Can we give the love to others that we give to babies?" he asked.

Many discussions about love ended up being about loss, fear of loving and trust that extends to parents, relatives and other caregivers who the youth felt hurt by, and to their contemporary romantic relationships. Other discussions focused on acknowledging sources of love in their lives and a desire to repair those relationships. It was clear that the act of forgiveness plays a big role in these discussions, with the anger that gets in the way of love a theme of many discussions.

Youth often talked about family members who hurt them but who also felt equally hurt by the youth. The following is an example of this complex mix of emotions and experiences:

Family Specialist (FS): If everybody is hurt and angry, then what is going to change?

Youth1: I apologized to my family for ending up in DYRS for all the stupid stuff I did. But nobody in my family is apologizing for what they did to me.

FS: But If you forgave them how would you act differently? Imagine they all apologized.

Youth1: I would just feel different. I might feel happy. I might want to spend time with them. I might want to get out of the group home more.

FS: What about trying that and seeing what will happen? What if you all forgave and acted toward others with love would your relationship to your family change? "

Youth2: I think my brother wants to get along with me but we both are kind of careful around each other. I am going to try, make some sign so he will know all has been forgiven.

Youth 3: I think my mom doesn't change no matter what. The more chores I do, she gets suspicious. What are you trying to get? It's like she is waiting for me to mess up.

FS: Do you feel good about yourself that you are acting differently? If so, then don't let her take that away from you.

The following exercises were used in these groups to good effect:

Complete the following sentences:

I love it when...

In my family love is like...?

I wish someone would love me...

What I like to do when I love somebody is...

Two other exercises frequently utilized were: Describe (i) a meal where love was present, and (ii) an act of family love in your future life.

Covenants of Peace

“The Covenant of Peace” is an anti-violence initiative geared at addressing the systemic issues in and around violence. The goal of the Covenant of Peace is to stem the tide of violence in the District of Columbia and beyond by reaching out to the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services’ committed youth, both in its facilities and in violence-torn communities. After undergoing intense focus groups that explore and challenge the root causes of violence, committed youth at the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) sign a “Covenant,” an agreement to abstain from and speak against senseless acts of violence. DYRS and “credible messenger conduct focus groups during a series of “sleep-ins” that begin on a Friday afternoon and culminate the following Sunday. The Covenant of Peace is based on the seven pillars to help youth identify where violence originates.

Post-committed youth.

From the beginning of the CMMI many of the youth that have completed their commitment continue to talk to their mentors and participate in groups and other provider activities. This demonstrates the strength of the bond that many mentors and mentees develop. In interviews almost all of the youth expressed a desire to maintain a lifelong relationship with their mentors but also stated that after completing commitment they continued to face obstacles to their success. Mentors continued to provide support with job searches and placement, personal crises, food insecurity, and housing insecurity. One post-committed youth who suffers from mental difficulties reported that “my mentor is the only person I trust and can talk to. She sets me straight and pushes me to stay on my meds. Without her I am alone.” Another youth who regularly had conflicts with her boyfriend and her family relied on her mentor to find housing and pre-natal career. The majority of the mentees consider mentors to be family, therefore it

makes sense that they would want to maintain that relationship following commitment. In response to this DYRS allowed providers to request that post-committed youth could stay on provider caseloads if there is a demonstrated need for continued support.

The strength of the bond developed between mentors and mentees is that of a surrogate family. DYRS might want to consider ways in which the social service budget of D.C. might contribute to maintaining the mentor mentee relationship. So many of the youth have experienced the loss of family members due to death and/or incarceration. The abrupt loss of a mentor may recapitulate the sense of loss, abandonment, and rejection that many youth experienced in their lives.

Mental Health Issues.

Committed youth reported high levels of trauma coming primarily from three sources: physical abuse, sexual abuse, and observing or being the victim of gun violence. CM.s have expressed frustration with the provision of mental health services to young people. Mental health service providers were described as incompetent and lacking cultural sensitivity to the problems faced by committed youth. The youth and their families were also skeptical about the skills of mental health providers and equally concerned with the stigma associated with mental illness. In addition, youth were asked to visit the providers without having met them. CM.s often reported feeling ill-equipped to deal with some of the emotional and cognitive issues that more difficult mentees needed support with. Many mentors discussed the need to acquire a deeper understanding of mental health issues as well as knowledge of the appropriate techniques for supporting young people who are struggling with these issues.

DYRS leadership responded to these concerns by strengthening its mental health time. There are two full-time mental health professionals on staff. One is at New Beginnings and the other is at the achievement centers. The advantage of having psychologists embedded within these sites is that they are not strangers to the youth and makes the therapist a regular part of the staff rather than an outsider who works with “crazy people.” By participating in groups and interacting with youth and observing outside the context of direct treatment the psychologists gain a better sense of how youth interact with other youth and adults. The psychologists played a role in helping both care coordinators and the CM.s plan for meeting the youths’ mental health needs. The messengers have received training from the psychologists and have expressed an interest in receiving additional training.

Other group activities and community building:

The youth attended community meetings on local issues, participated in neighborhood cleanups, attended city council meetings and testified about the services provided by DYRS. They also visited the National Museum of African American history.

There is a youth council of DYRS that plans activities, discusses DYRS policies and practices and gives feedback to the DYRS leadership. All of these activities support the idea that the youth are a part of their community and can play an active role. Providing the youth with a

voice in the agency and in larger democratic structures sends several messages: (i) the youth are part of the agency and they are a constituency group not a passive population entirely subject to the control of agency; (ii) while youth are still committed to the agency and recipients of its discipline, giving the youth voice is part of process of empowerment; (iii) through participating in community projects, the youth are engaged in an aspect of restorative justice by giving back to a community where they may have caused damage.

The youth have shown great pride in these activities. As one member of the DYRS council put it:

“My life matters, my friends’ lives matter, my community matters. It’s like we are not just problem kids, now we are young adults that are part of the solution!”

New Beginnings

Throughout the year, we made observations at New Beginnings, the youth detention facility. We observed the Credible Messengers interact with youth within this setting. We followed the messengers in every shift and throughout the day. The CMs have access to most parts of the facility and are able to work alongside the YDRs to keep the youth safe. This includes following youth in school, recreational activities, groups, and ‘down time.’ As reported by one of the CMs, the CMs have been valuable in keeping the number of incidents down. They attribute a large part of this to the CMs being able to more effectively work with youth when they become upset. They are able to tend to their emotional well-being. The CM’s are able to listen to the youth; once in similar situations that they were in. The uncertainty of their case status, which produces feelings of anxiety and fear are buffered by the CMs being able to comfort them while being imprisoned. While some YDRs can also relate to the youth, as one of the CMs said:

“At the end of the day, we not the one shutting the [cell] door on them.”

At times, this created tensions between the CMs and the YDRs. However, one of the CMs indicated that this was something that may not be a bad thing:

“It’s two worlds coming together and sometimes they clash. That just means it’s working. That’s what is supposed to be happening.”

The Credible Messengers enjoy the work they do within the facility. However, it can be a challenge to have to work within a system that they’ve been through. Feelings related to the vicarious traumas of imprisonment (having been to prison) were reported. Moreover, the attachment of CMs to youth can be difficult to navigate, especially those that will move to an adult facility. Many of the CMs have also experienced the loss of many of the youth that they have worked with at New Beginnings. In a conversation with one of them, he says:

“You wouldn’t even know what they are even here. What I’ve learned from doing this job is that they are just kids and act like kids. I’m just here to love them and show them love. It’s going to get hard, so that’s why I let them be kids.”

“The hardest thing about working with them is knowing some of the won’t get out for a while. Some of them will do up to 40 years and that’s hard.”

Yet, the CMs were able to provide comfort to these youth and answered questions around navigating the criminal legal system. Many CMs expressed how they remembered being locked up and not having support, feeling scared, and being isolated. CMs reported that the kids missed them when they are gone and notice their presence.

In the beginning of the year, the CMs at New Beginnings went on a retreat to build cohesion. They worked at a different facility to learn from and about each other. According to one of the organizers of the retreat, this was meant to strengthen their bonds described as a “brotherhood.” Upon returning from the retreat, the CMs met as a group and discussed the positive aspects of their experience and how much they appreciated each other. They emphasized their commitment to loving the youth in the facility. They also gave each other feedback on being accountable to each other. At the end, they hug and exchange compliments.

Early in the year, we arrived at the facility where a CM told me that the youth were having a stepping contest. We got to the cafeteria where there are about 20 youth at the tables with their families. The large windows were covered with stickers and posters for Black History month. They (the youth) were all wearing white t-shirts that said “NB Steppers.” We went to one of the tables where there were three youth. One of the youth turned to me and said “he depressed” pointing to a youth next to him, then continuing: “he’s depressed because nobody here for him.” The CM wraps one of his arms around the youth. The CM says that these youth didn’t have family to visit them and so, he sat with them and tried to comfort them and make them feel not alone.

COVID

On a bright morning in June, four Credible Messengers are setting up a station for assisting with mutual-aid efforts in the Columbia Heights neighborhood in Washington, D.C. Since the pandemic, the Credible Messengers had been helping with food distribution in various parts of the District. In this bustling community, there is a long wrap-around line of people waiting to be served a hot meal and receive groceries. One of the Credible Messenger says they are out there to help out the community. In fact, he says, he has seen many of the families and youth he works with. Since the pandemic began, the Credible Messengers have attempted to stay connected to the youth as much as they possibly can. Bryan says:

“They [youth] need to know that we are thinking about them. They are saying that there is a lot of financial stress and burdens on their families right now. They are hurting. Many of them want to help out at home and bring in money. Rather than go on the wrong path, I try to support them however way I can, whether that’s by taking them shopping or bringing them groceries.”

The CMs have continued these efforts during the pandemic, engaging with youth virtually and in-person. They also viewed their families and communities as extensions of the youth, hence, their helping with food distribution.

Conclusion

Experiences and Impacts

Based on our analysis of the data, the CMMI has had a manifold positive impact on the agency, its employees and the youth subjects spending part of their life course with DYRS. The goals that CMMI wanted to achieve: (i) improving the capacity-building of youth; (ii) deepening youth's ties to both the community and the family; and (iii) enabling youth to become peacemakers in their own community, we can conclude have been met on various levels. This is particularly the case with the first goal, based not only on our interviews and observations but also on the most recent statistics from the agency that report a reduction in youth recidivism of approximately 50% (i.e., in 2016-17 youth who had been previously committed with DYRS were being reconvicted within a year at a rate that was 50% less than the previous year.

According to the data such youth had a recidivism rate of 44% in 2015-16 and 22% in 2016-17 when CMMI was first introduced. While there are areas of CMMI that can be improved and developed, these first two years of the initiative show the extraordinary potential for rehabilitation, reform and transcendence that lies within youth committed to DYRS if provided the appropriate social support, mentorship and opportunities to plot their developmental path in a productive and meaningful manner. Further, the initiative also points to the extant resources and reservoir of knowledge and experience that lies largely untapped within populations of the formerly incarcerated that could be harnessed to the cause of youth empowerment and community fortification. The following comprise concluding remarks regarding the experiences of a range of social actors who have been key to the initiative's progress over the past two years.

The Youth:

The youth reported a high level of satisfaction in relationships with their mentors. Youth viewed these mentors/messengers as making a key, positive contribution to their journey through the juvenile justice system while also helping them prepare for a more stable and meaningful engagement with their families and communities. In addition, the youth saw their participation in the CMMI as a powerful influence on their changing orientations to education, work, and the family. These experiences enabled them to think more positively about the future and moving forward with a sense of hope and optimism, perhaps for the first time in their lives. They consistently reported that the extra support coming from CMMI helped them develop new and enhanced coping skills to deal with often highly stressful situations in their personal and family lives, as well as giving them a greater sense of

self-confidence in interacting with bureaucratic agencies and institutional authority. It should be noted that these youth generally came from the most marginalized social strata in the Washington, D.C. area, their life chances shaped by their class, race and gendered societal locations. Thus, the introduction of trusted, community-based individuals into their lives who were: (i) committed to their personal betterment and social enhancement, and (ii) can access greatly needed resources to counteract the impacts of structural poverty and neglect cannot be underestimated. Such youth spoke from a place of dire social, economic and emotional need. The introduction of CMMI produced new social processes in which the youth could participate and experience opportunity structures hitherto seemingly unavailable to them. In effect, they experienced how a government agency could be committed to the goals and practices of social control through social empowerment rather than repression and punishment.

The Credible Messengers:

Our interviews with mentors revealed satisfaction with the training methods of DYRS but also a desire for more extensive training. While some mentors complained about financial compensation, since most still needed external sources of income, practically all of them asserted a commitment to frequent meetings with mentees and to a level of availability to them at any hour of the day (or night).

Unlike professional mentors with degrees in psychology or social work, the typical credible messenger was not relying on any particular model of the mind as a basis for cognitive-behavior intervention (or modelling) that is consistent with any specialized discourse or academic school of thought. The mentors relied instead on the reintegrative principles which the program has labeled PILLARS. These cognitive schemata and behavioral habits were seen as consistent with personal growth and development and with the objective of strengthening the institutional nexus of distressed communities. Thus, mentees were not expected merely to control anger or learn how to manage stressful situations, or to avoid negative thoughts, but to think seriously about how/why his/her life matters, and what kind of thinking and behavior is consistent with that belief. Therefore, If life matters, there is an ostensible need to fill the void left by absent caregivers and role models (i.e. what requires mentoring in the first place), and to learn to move past or transform grievances which are the source of self-defeating anger (i.e. to forgive others), to gain a sense of pride by proving to be good to one's word; and, most importantly, to learn to love. The language of love is unique to this program.

Credible messengers liked that the initiative not only trained them to refrain from making moralistic judgments as mentees sought to develop positive social networks but encouraged them to assume a mediating role in this process, one in which the mentee was able to turn to a mentor for guidance and support. In this combined process, mentors participated in the mentees' transformation. Credible messengers positively noted that unlike the traditional

logic of probation and parole, CMMI saw peer networks as integral parts of the community with highly contradictory possibilities - just as much as the institutions that seek the reformation, assimilation, or elimination of the mentees themselves.

Care Coordinators

Care coordinators reported a somewhat mixed experience with the CMMI though with time they developed a better working relationship with the credible messengers as each learned how their respective roles could complement one another. The tensions between the two groups grew out of the different occupational statuses of each, with one an accepted professional occupational based on years of training with positions earned on the basis of university credentials combined with field experience versus a much newer addition to the occupational ranks where knowledge and experience are judged very differently, not least because the weight placed on formal credentials is negligible. Nonetheless, a number of coordinators noted that their respect for the work of the credible messengers increased as they learned to appreciate more the kinds of support they could provide to both youth and their families.

Parents

Parents reported strong support for the initiative and generally welcomed the added support to their families and the extra resources made available to them. While it was noted that parent support groups are not easy to organize, reflecting to some extent the stresses that families are already experiencing.

Impact of Other Processes

The DYRS youth council and elder council have provided input about the implementation of the CMMI and its incorporation into the larger structure of DYRS. The town hall meetings have allowed for direct communication between the management of DYRS leadership and the messengers. Changes in policies, procedures, and practices have followed town hall meetings. Procedures were changed to expedite the processing of flex fund requests including an expedited appeals process. Monthly meeting between care coordinators and the coordinators of the six sponsoring agencies to guarantee regular dialog and problem solving. Rules have been issued clarifying the messengers' role when youth are in abscondence.

The Impact on the Institution

The CMMI initiative and its underlying philosophy pushed the agency and its members to review current and past practices regarding the concept of rehabilitation. Formal rehabilitation engaged in by large bureaucratic agencies, both state and non-state, often replicate top-down relationships between the institution and the subjects in their charge.

Such a relationship builds on the deficit model of “treating” youth offenders which is dominant in the current juvenile justice system. The initiative works to reverse this accepted notion of rehabilitation urging agency members to see youth as complex and contradictory young person’s undergoing a process of positive change. The role of the agency is to use all its multifaceted resources, including: social and safe space, institutional knowledge, legal authority, individual counseling, family intervention, formal education, mentoring services, work training, community attachments etc. to propel youth forward, building on their strengths, capacities and possibilities for growth and transcendence. We found that on the whole agency members warmed to this challenge to change and reform the institution and adopt new practices in sync with the initiative’s goals.

The Impact on the Community

This aspect of the evaluation has yet to be fully undertaken but there is already strong evidence to show that the CMMI has been successful in helping to build and strengthen the social infrastructure of communities where DYRS youth originate and reside. We feel that this is no mean achievement and shows both the direct and indirect effect of helping youth to build positive new identities which, in turn, can see them become agents of change in both family and community settings. The challenge will be to support this process of qualitative change in youth as they re-enter society with these new skills and propensities such that their presence contributes to the quantitative transformation required in community relations and relationships in pathways to a more peaceful social order. In contrast with the notion of ‘transformative’ mentoring that appears in other mentoring programs, the CMMI is more ambitious in its goals of transforming the community within which the reintegration of at-risk and formerly incarcerated youth is to take place.

Recommendations

Youth:

- Both mentors and care-coordinators recommended a more comprehensive mental health provision for committed youth.
- Introduce more critical pedagogy into group discussions to validate youth experiences and the contexts of their lives – this might help youth to understand the source of their anger and alienation at the societal level
- A more critical pedagogical engagement with youth might increase their sense of agency
- Youth often talked about finding job opportunities through their mentors rather than through the agency – more data on the job training and job seeking experiences along with youths’ subsequent engagement in the working world would be important data for the initiative

- More data required on the educational experiences of youth both during and after commitment would be important for the initiative

Credible Messengers:

- There is a need for more rigorous and ongoing training for credible messengers. While credible messengers are recruited for their “insider” knowledge and cultural competency the opportunity to engage in more professionalized education aimed at increasing skills and capacities in facilitation, analysis and organization would enhance the effectiveness of service delivery as well as professional development.
- If resources permit, perhaps a weekly training session of four hours could be organized as part of the working day. The types of professional education and instruction could vary, with specialists engaged who could address the layered emotional, social and cultural experiences of youth and families in distressed urban environments.
- As part of these trainings, mentors should be made aware of developments of “best practices” in the field and any new research that is pertinent to their occupation and effectiveness.
- Increased training should be accompanied by better remuneration and more possibilities for advancement.

Care coordinators:

- Establish regular cross training between the care coordinators and the credible messengers
- Successful experiences of working together can be used as models at meetings.
- Have messengers and coordinators present cases together. Examples should be given of successful strategies and cases where the results were negative or mixed. Perhaps, there can be role-playing where care coordinators and messengers are given hypothetical situations and asked how they would deal with it.
- Have DYRS youth government talk to both credible messengers and care coordinators about how to address the needs of youth.

- Flex fund requests should be time stamped and a supervisor must make inquiries if there are areas of need for the youth and their families. Create documents where everyone's roles are clearly delineated, and standard operating procedures are developed. Incorporate the perspective of all constituencies about what has worked, what has not worked and what needs improvement.

- More research needs to be done about the mental health needs of the youth, e.g.

- What percentage of the youth have mental health needs?
- What percentage of the youth are receiving services?
- How do these needs impact the social educational, and vocational functioning of the youth?
- How can services provided by DYRS be coordinated with other agencies?

Parents:

- Incorporate the best practices of the more successful groups

Groups:

Some suggestions on the check-ins:

- Messengers should either not participate in the check-in or be more willing to share when they are not a “ten.”
- Check-in questions could be more varied, which may be a way to get more youth to participate.
- Relate more often something positive that is happening in life.
- Describe a problem or a challenge that was faced successfully and/or describe a challenge or a problem that one would like to talk about.

(• Possibly lower the number of CM.s participating in each group. If as was often the case, the number of CM.s equals or is close in number to the number of youth participating, then the voice of the CM.s may dominate group discussion and lower youth participation.)

Warm up activities:

Groups have used warm up activities differently. Some providers have made the group activity a central part of the group with the warm up activity serving as a stimulus for the group discussion. Other groups have combined the warm up activity with the checking

in activity. Physical activity such as the use of cooperation games and dance can serve to generate greater group solidarity.

Group discussion process:

- The goal for group size should generally be between 6-8 youth. However, there may be group content or processes where larger groups are called for. When the goal is creating an environment where young people feel safe and comfortable group size needs to be limited. Smaller group sizes may also facilitate the formation of deeper bonds between the members. What we have found through interviews and observations is that members often do not know the names of other members let alone having familiarity with their history, current life situation, and identity. By reducing the number of credible messengers who need to be present groups might be held on different nights of the week, which meet fit better with the schedule of some of the youth.
- When new participants come into the group there should be a process where the members exchange introductions and where the rules and rituals of the group are discussed.
- Group membership should be better defined.
- The role of outside participants needs to be considered, e.g. friends and family have sometimes participated in the groups. When this happens the group becomes connected to the larger community but it also detracts from the group being a safe and intimate space.
- We have observed that attendance has dropped off noticeably for many of the providers with providers expressing frustration at being tied to the pillars. However, the leadership has responded by making it clear that not every group needs to be tied to the pillars. Perhaps a clearer policy in this area needs to be considered.
- More emphasis on mutual aid. The youth build solidarity and gain more confidence in their ability to problem solve.
- More role-playing activity so that youth gain practice in bringing to life the behavioral strategies they learn from the messengers.
- Youth might play more of role in challenging and supporting other youth which is central, for example, to the Missouri model

- Two of the groups involved the youth in food preparation, serving the food and clean up. This practice might be more encouraged as it gave the youth a sense of pride and ownership. We also noted that the youth were happier with home-made meals than catered meals.
- Almost all of the youth or the CM.s reported being unhappy with moving the groups to the achievement centers as they felt it took away a sense of ownership and belonging. This policy might be revisited.

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Appendix

Credible messenger survey. Please circle answers when given choices.

- How did you hear about the credible messenger program?

- Have you already done credible messenger work? Yes No Formally or Informally?

For how many years_____

3. How has your life changed?

4. How can your life experience help young people change?

5. Did the training provide you with a new understanding of how to work with young people?

6. How effective was the boot camp overall?

very effective effective partially effective not effective

7. how well prepared has the training made you feel for doing the work of a credible messenger?

well prepared prepared poorly prepared unprepared

8. Which aspects of the training were most successful?

9 Which aspects of the training were least successful?

10. Do you think you need more training? If so, what additional training would you like to receive?

11. If you could make changes in the training what would you suggest?

“The trainers listened to me”:

agree strongly agree somewhat disagree disagree strongly

“The training was well prepared and well organized”:

agree agree somewhat disagree disagree strongly

What skills did you gain?

Are there aspects of the training that you have issues with? Explain

“The training has made me feel fully prepared to be a credible messenger”:

agree strongly agree somewhat disagree somewhat disagree strongly

“I understand the role of the credible messenger with DYRS?”:

Agree strongly agree somewhat disagree somewhat disagree strongly

“I understand what is expected of me my clients”:

agree strongly agree somewhat disagree somewhat disagree strongly

“I know what to do when clients are in crisis”:

agree strongly agree somewhat disagree somewhat

The training strengthened my feeling of being connected with other credible messengers:

agree strongly agree somewhat disagree somewhat disagree strongly

“The training prepared me to do circle work”:

agree strongly agree somewhat disagree somewhat disagree strongly

If there are questions that did not allow you the chance to express something but raised an issue for you feel free to elaborate below. Survey give you limited choices to respond to. Below is your space to go beyond those limits and offer feedback on the training not contained in the survey questions.
