

Youth Opportunity: The Lessons, Legacy, and Impact on Community Practice

Rural Arkansas Southeast

In Brief:

- In 2000, Rural Arkansas was awarded a \$19.8 million Youth Opportunity Grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.
- Since opening its doors, YO! Arkansas has engaged more than 2,100 young people in workforce and education programs.
- YO! Arkansas placed more than 500 youth in jobs with an average starting wage of \$8.25, about \$1.00 more than the state minimum wage during 2000-2005.
- YO! Arkansas helped more than 794 young people gain valuable educational credentials (post-secondary degree, high school diploma, GED, or Vocational skill credential); and another 1,496 stay in school.
- PYFS (a YO! Arkansas partner that creates social, economic and community opportunities for rural and improvised Southeast Arkansas residents) conducted a cost-benefit analysis showing that the cost of having a young person participate in the Arkansas project was 25% of the estimated daily cost of keeping a young person in a detention center.
- In 2004, the Dermott Juvenile Detention Center in rural Southeast Arkansas closed its doors. The local judge cited the intervention of PYFS as the overriding reason.

For More Information about PYFS and Rural Arkansas, contact:

Toyce Newton
President/CEO
Phoenix Youth and Family Services
tnewton@phoenixyouth.com

The Youth Opportunity Story: Changing the Landscape For Youth In High Poverty Communities

In May 2000, the United States Department of Labor created the Youth Opportunity Grant Program (YO). YO was developed with a specific purpose in mind; to establish a national demonstration initiative designed to overhaul the youth delivery system that originated in the Workforce Investment Act of 1988. During the first year, 36 high-poverty urban, rural, and Native American communities were awarded YO Grants. These communities, which were among the most economically distressed communities in the nation, were also experiencing high dropout rates, high youth unemployment rates, and greater incidences of juvenile crime, violence, and gang activity.

The Youth Opportunity Grants – ranging from \$3.1 to \$43.8 million over five years – provided the resources to establish comprehensive approaches at considerable scale. In addition, YO called for the creation of the following initiatives:

- A comprehensive youth service system, which included skills training, basic education, work experience, committed involvement of caring adults and developmental opportunities aimed at assisting young people in the successful transition to adulthood and responsible citizenship;
- Youth Opportunity Community Centers to provide safe and accessible places where youth can increase their educational and employment skills as well as receive long-term supportive services; and
- Partnerships among public, private and nonprofit organizations to leverage resources and expand outcomes.

When I started, I didn't have a job and I lacked many of the skills to get one. Through Phoenix I gained the skills I needed to get a job and even did things I had never thought about, like opening a bank account. They also paid for and supported me in getting my barber's license. Over time, I went from being a respectful participant in Phoenix, to a serious youth advocate who taught life skills to new program participants. Phoenix took me and my peers to new heights. I don't know what I would have done without the program.

YO! Arkansas Participant

At the heart of the YO story are the thousands of youth who lives have been changed as a result of access and opportunities to tools and resources they needed to prepare for the future.

Simply put, YO changed lives.

The Lessons: YO! Rural Arkansas

Much was accomplished in a relatively short period of time in this community. The YO Arkansas experience gave Phoenix Youth and Family Services (PYFS) a unique opportunity to address the needs of young people and help the community move toward its goal of reversing the economic decline of the area and the consequent departure of its young people.

The Southeast Arkansas school system worked with PYFS to provide one-on-one tutoring and enrichment classes. Each of the seven school districts has allowed PYFS recruiter/liaisons to work on their campuses in order to bridge communication gaps and ensure a more seamless flow of services for those in-school participants. The services provided by PYFS included transportation and child care, exposure for disconnected youth to academic programs, training activities, and job opportunities. In addition, PYFS offered a variety of youth development activities that prepared youth for successful employment, improved educational achievements, and leadership development.

Southeast Arkansas assigned adult mentors to youth based on shared interests or career goals. The mentors spent a minimum of two hours per week with the youth and provided written reports about their activities and their mentees' progress.

The Rural Arkansas Legacy

Many of the 36 communities that received federal funding through the YO program have continued to provide comprehensive youth services and supports based on the YO model even after the grant period ended. Using the service model developed during the YO grant period, rural Southeast Arkansas and PYFS continue to collaborate on providing services and support to local youth who are disconnected from school and work. Their goals are to increase the number of long-term employment opportunities, encourage students to attend college and reduce dropout rates. School counselors and dedicated staff work with program participants to assess their levels of academic preparation, identify their skills and interests and create individual plans to help them reconnect and stay connected to school and work. The case managers also stay involved, maintaining regular contact with youth to monitor their progress and keep them motivated.

Addressing the Facts

Research has shown locking up delinquent youth, especially youth who commit non-violent crimes, can do far greater harm than good and does little to rehabilitate them. At a minimum, all communities need to start implementing research-based intervention and prevention programs to serve as community based alternatives to incarceration. Even rural communities such as those in Arkansas, which don't have the capacity to build successful programs to scale, can incorporate proven intervention and prevention strategies into existing programs that create alternatives. Having community based alternatives to incarceration, as research has proven, will successfully address juvenile delinquency and crime and generate huge cost-savings that can be reinvested in long-term approaches and best-practices.

Consider the Facts:

- Youth who are committed to the Division of Youth Services (DYS) cost the state of Arkansas \$150 per day. Youth placed in "specialty" facilities, such as the Arkansas State Hospital, can cost the state as much as \$480 a day.
- African Americans comprise only 20% of the children and youth in Arkansas, but comprise nearly half (49%) of the DYS population.
- In 2007, it cost Arkansas \$11 million to operate the Arkansas Juvenile Assessment and Treatment Center (AJATC).
- In 2008, 113 children and youth ages 13-18 were admitted to AJATC in one day. Roughly half (51%) were African American.
- During the first 3 quarters of 2008, more than 90% of all commitments were for non-violent offenses.
- Juvenile judges in Arkansas do not have an adequate array of community based alternatives to avoid commitment. As a result, youth who might otherwise be safely kept in the community are being incarcerated.