

# "Putting Youth to Work" Series

Examples of Effective Practice in Distressed Communities

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## **Southeast Arkansas**

### **Overview**

Southeastern Arkansas faces the challenge of addressing barriers for a significant number of disconnected young people. This rural area is characterized by unemployment rates that are double the state and national average. More than 33 percent of the population is under 18 years old and 90 percent of female-headed households live below the poverty level. Fifty-four percent of the out-of-school population has not completed high school, forecasting a seriously undereducated workforce<sup>1</sup>. To address these barriers, Phoenix Youth and Family Services (PYFS) has served as the hub of collaboration for disconnected youth since 1995. PYFS is a social, economic, and community development organization whose primary mission is to create opportunities for rural and impoverished residents of Southeast Arkansas.

PYFS works in conjunction with a number of agencies and systems in the area, including the school system, the workforce investment system, the juvenile justice system, nonprofits and employers to address the education, safety and employment needs of Southeastern Arkansas' youth. PYFS draws on all the major community stakeholders for its board, which includes a superintendent, a county judge, a minister, a service provider, and a private citizen who works in local industry. PYFS received significant funding from the Youth Opportunity Grant in 2000, which offered a unique opportunity to address the needs of young people and also to assist the community in moving toward its goal of reversing the economic decline of the area and the consequent departure of its young people<sup>2</sup>.

Arkansas is one of several states participating in the federal Shared Youth Vision, a partnership between the departments of Labor, Justice, Education, and Human Services. The partnership has sponsored several national forums and worked with all participating states to promote collaboration as the key to serving the neediest youth. The partnership's work with Arkansas provided the impetus for the creation of the Arkansas Youth Development Collaborative (AYDC), an interagency work group that has successfully brought together a collaborative of youth services, human services, traditional and alternative schools, high growth industry employers, and local workforce investment boards to freely share information and maintain an integrated approach to serve at-risk youth and their families. The Arkansas Workforce Investment Board (AWIB) has shown significant buy-in by adapting its delivery plan to provide staff time and financial resources to support this collaboration<sup>3</sup>.

Both AWIB and AYDC are committed to nurturing collaboration as an effective approach to a major challenge that rural youth face—the lack of comprehensive services in a single location. AYDC is working to connect youth with high quality secondary and postsecondary educational opportunities, including apprenticeship, public service, entrepreneurship, military, and 2 to 4 year college. It has established the Arkansas Youth Development Collaboration Youth of Promise website that is youth friendly and provides a wealth of resources in one place that youth and their service providers can access<sup>4</sup>.

## ***Major Accomplishments***

### ***Workforce Development***

PYFS employs several strategies to reengage youth and put them on the right educational and career path. Through its many programs, PYFS staff support youth in a successful transition to adulthood. PYFS established Focusing on Academics, Character and Employability Skills (FACES) to support students ages 14 to 18 who are educationally and socially disadvantaged. FACES offers a wide range of academic enrichment and remediation, career and job development, life skills enhancement, and other support services to identified youth people<sup>5</sup>.

FACES offers academic enrichment services three hours a day, four days a week during the school year. Participants attend a community-based site that allows them to work on basic learning skills in reading, math and writing, focus on analytical skills, computer training, and experimental learning, explore career possibilities and learn resume writing, prepare for college entrance exams and complete financial aid, college and scholarship applications<sup>6</sup>.

In addition to FACES, PYFS continues its service model developed during the Youth Opportunity grant-funded period to collaboratively serve the community’s at-risk and out-of-school young people. Programming for these young people strives to increase long-term employment opportunities, encourage students to attend college and decrease the high-school dropout rate. It offers a variety of youth development activities that prepare young people for successful employment, improved educational achievement, leadership development and support services<sup>7</sup>.

Dedicated staff is the key to the program’s effectiveness. They connect with young people to: assess the level of academic preparation, skills and interest of youth; create a support plan to highlight strengths and identify need; track and monitor youth to keep them motivated and involved in the program; advocate on behalf of the participants to ensure that needed services are available; provide needed support services, including transportation and child care; and expose young people to academic programs, training activities and job opportunities<sup>8</sup>.

### ***Education***

In Southeast Arkansas, the school system works in conjunction with PYFS to enhance educational skills attainment by engaging youth in individual tutoring and enrichment classes. Each of the seven school districts has allowed recruiter/liaisons, employed by PYFS, to be housed on their campuses to bridge communication gaps and ensure a more seamless flow of services for those in-school participants<sup>9</sup>.

Partnerships and collaborations between the local university, technical schools, local small businesses, and traditional secondary schools have also formed to support youth pursuing their secondary education and transitioning into postsecondary opportunities<sup>10</sup>.

### ***Employer Engagement***

Through its success in connecting hard-to-reach youth to employment, PYFS has developed relationships with more than 60 regional employers that recognize its ability to provide qualified young workers who have been appropriately equipped for the work place. Job counselors are available to employers to assure that the job experience is mutually beneficial. Partnerships have included agreements in which PYFS pays the salaries of ex-offenders for 60 to 90 days, provided that their new employers set them up with mentors and intend to employ the youth full-time if the trial period is successful<sup>11</sup>.

### ***Juvenile Justice***

PYFS collaborated with the Workforce Investment Board in Northeast Louisiana, which is part of the Southeast Arkansas work area, to secure a \$2 million Rural Youth Offender grant from the Department of Labor. The grant allowed PYFS to assess the needs of young offenders ages 16 to 21 and provide them with a support system to meet the needs of rural offenders while ensuring community safety. The program offers non-conventional vocational and job readiness training and arranges fast track job placement in healthcare, information technology, leisure and hospitality and transportation services. It also offers a case management program to track, monitor and support program participants<sup>12</sup>.

In addition to the Rural Youth Offender Program, Southeast Arkansas has court liaisons for all court sessions. These liaisons offer pre-release services inside the facility. In addition, the program shares all grant proposals with the juvenile courts to promote greater collaboration. PYFS also established the Stand Up Employee Excellence Workshop, which is a two week intensive training program that leads to employment opportunities for re-entering youth whose pre-release assessment identifies an urgent financial need for employment<sup>13</sup>.

PYFS conducted a cost-benefit analysis showing that while it cost an estimated \$100 a day to house a youth in a detention center, it cost only \$25 for the same youth to participate in the Arkansas Project as a restorative justice alternative. In 2004, after 10 years of operation, the Dermott Juvenile Detention Center in rural Southeast Arkansas closed its doors. The local judge credited the intervention of PYFS as the overriding reason for the decrease in the juvenile docket, which ultimately led to the closing of the facility. Unfortunately, funds for youth programming in the area have been drastically decreased, cutting services and supports to these youth, ultimately prompting lawmakers to reopen the detention center<sup>14</sup>.

**For more information, contact:**

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<sup>1</sup> CCRY Network web site, <http://www.ccrynetwork.org/?q=node/70>.

<sup>2</sup> CCRY Network web site, <http://www.ccrynetwork.org/?q=node/70>.

<sup>3</sup> CCRY Network web site, <http://www.ccrynetwork.org/?q=node/70>.

<sup>4</sup> CCRY Network web site, <http://www.ccrynetwork.org/?q=node/70>.

<sup>5</sup> Phoenix Youth and Family Services marketing materials, provided by Toyce Newton, President and CEO.

<sup>6</sup> Phoenix Youth and Family Services marketing materials provided by Toyce Newton, President and CEO.

<sup>7</sup> Phoenix Youth and Family Services marketing materials provided by Toyce Newton, President and CEO.

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