

"Putting Youth to Work" Series

Examples of Effective Practice in Distressed Communities

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Best Practice Examples in:

- ✓ Delivery Agent
- ✓ Workforce and Employer Engagement
- ✓ Partnership with Education
- ✓ Partnership with Juvenile Justice
- ✓ Partnership with Child Welfare

Overview

The Future Workforce Committee (the Youth Council) is led by Capital Workforce Partners (the region's Workforce Investment Board) and is comprised of a youth services division representative, other governmental agency representatives, employers, youth serving organization representatives and others. The Committee faces the challenge of addressing barriers for a significant number of

disconnected young people - nearly 3,000 young adults 18-24 are not attending school and not working¹ and many more younger youth have dropped out or are at-risk of dropping out of high school. The Committee is tasked with developing the strategic plan to address these issues. The Plan is then implemented by Capital Workforce Partners (CWP). CWP is the local workforce investment board for North Central Connecticut and coordinates comprehensive workforce development programming for youth provided through contracted private and public partners and service providers. CWP works to create a "workforce of the future" through the implementation of strategies and programming geared toward meeting the needs of youth, employers and the local economy for more than 3,000 young people served in a given year through summer youth employment, year-round employment programming, WIA youth programming, Job Corps and other programming.

The focus of CWP's Youth Council is to increase the number of in-school youth graduating from high school with a full set of career competencies. It does this by targeting resources to major municipalities in the Capitol Region of Connecticut. A primary example of this in Hartford is Capital Workforce Partners' work with the Hartford Office of Youth Services (HOYS), which funds positive youth development programming and special initiatives to address current community needs and coordinate with state and foundation partners to maximize the effectiveness of dollars invested in Hartford youth. Established in fall 2006, HOYS focuses on coordination, capacity building and strategic partnerships with key stakeholders to address the needs of all Hartford Youth. Our Piece of the Pie® (OPP®), a youth development organization in Hartford, is a key provider of services for both in-school and out-of-school youth in Hartford, and it closely partners with CWP and HOYS. Up to 15 to 20 agencies form the nucleus of youth-serving organizations that compose the entire future workforce development system in Hartford. Special emphasis is placed on professional youth development training, program development and tracking of outcomes through Hartford Connects.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Workforce and Employer Engagement

CWP runs a four-tiered, age appropriate set of strategies that focuses on job readiness, placement, and preparedness at different age brackets. Tier I is traditionally designed for the youngest students, ages 14-15. This tier is strongest in learning and development. Tier II adds more real work and job-readiness components to the work experience. Tier III is often comprised of high school juniors who have already experienced this type of program and are further developed. Tier IV is for those ready to enter the Career Connections IV program and to seek out partially or unsubsidized “work and learn” experiences.

CWP developed a comprehensive framework for competency attainment called the Career Competency System as the foundation for all youth programming. It is a required model for all providers who are contracted through CWP. The Career Competency System is a “work and learn” tier design approach to competency development to help provide young people exposure to careers and career competencies, to design youth workforce development services that reflect the needs of regional growth industries, to document work readiness skills and collect data for outcomes analysis, and for use as a model for quality and developmental service provision used by all providers².

Capital Workforce Partners, Hartford Office of Youth Services and its partners are able to track progress for youth through Hartford Connects II - a web-based, program management tool for youth service organizations that captures data and reports information. It has a multiple entity data sharing mechanism, which allows for better sharing, tracking and correlation of educational and youth development data³.

As Capital Workforce Partners works to create a “workforce of the future”, it targets training resources toward occupations in the region that have sustainable wages and high growth potential. CWP has identified clusters of industries in their area, which includes allied health, financial and insurance services, high technology manufacturing and retail/ hospitality. It has begun to develop relationships with these industry leaders to craft appropriate training and programming that will prepare youth for these industries and arrange formal and informal ways for employers to engage.

The Capital Workforce Partners Career Competency System was developed with extensive input from employers to define not only the skills required for success in entry-level employment and postsecondary education but also to define how and at what stage employers should be involved. CWP integrated employer engagement activities into its four-tiered Career Competency System.

In addition to the Career Competency System, Our Piece of the Pie (OPP®), along with all other contracted youth delivery organizations who receive funding from CWP, work with youth to create a “Dream Resume” where they explore future career options and possibilities as well as a real-time resume so that when they leave the program after the summer they will know what it takes to get the jobs they want and they have an action plan for how to get there. Through the training sessions at OPP®, youth receive solid links from school to career. Youth must also create a “portfolio” before they exit the program demonstrating goals, financial literacy, communication and other skills.

At OPP®, youth can participate in “Youth Businesses” for 20 hours over a six-week period. This opportunity includes 10 hours of hands-on experiential learning in arts, environmental sciences, woodworking, community advocacy, multi-media or computer science, and 10 hours of Integrated Learning Training - life and career skill building - where youth work on resumes, interviewing and time-management. These youth (depending on age and experience and where they fall in the Tier System) receive either stipends or minimum wage while completing their project. Recent projects have included: a citywide lead-poisoning awareness campaign aimed at educating elementary school students and their families; an anti-violence themed CD written, recorded and produced by OPP® youth, and collaboration with National Geographic to study snapping turtles in the Connecticut River⁴.

Case Management

Our Piece of the Pie (OPP®) helps youth ages 14 to 24 become successful adults. The two primary goals of the program are to complete college or receive a postsecondary vocational credential, and find long-term employment. The cornerstone of OPP® programs and services is its signature Pathways to Success approach. Pathways to Success is a youth development strategy designed to help youth access and attain education, employment and personal skills. Together, youth and their Youth Development Specialists create individualized plans that map a realistic path to reach their goals.

A crucial component to the Pathways to Success program is the role of its Youth Development Specialist (YDS) – a guide to the services OPP® offers and a caring and consistent adult who advises and supports youth as they work to accomplish their goals. When a young person enters OPP®, they are matched with a YDS, beginning the trust-building process. The YDS assesses the young person’s status and needs and works with them to determine a pathway to a long-term educational and/or employment outcome. Together, they build an Individualized Service Plan broken down into practical steps to achieve larger goals, such as graduating from high school or improving school attendance. The YDS supports youth as they participate in educational, training or employment activities and helps them to navigate the systems and services in which they are involved in. An average caseload for a YDS is between 60 to 70 youth with conscious thought about balancing case loads by assessing the level of need of each youth.

OPP® and the Pathways to Success approach stays with youth up until age 24. Should a young person enter OPP® at age 14, they could potentially have that caring and consistent adult with them for up to ten years. Because transitioning to adulthood is a critical time in a young person’s life, maintaining that support and guidance beyond the period he/she enters into employment or postsecondary education is essential.

Education

The Hartford Public School system is in the midst of a transformation to become a system composed of small learning communities that provide a variety of options to students throughout the school system. At the high school level, the system created new schools that appeal to different career interests of youth and provide the rigor necessary to them excel.

Opening in fall 2009, OPPportunity High School will be the first partnership school in Hartford. Based on a model initiated in New York between Good Shepherd Services and the New York Department of Education, OPPportunity

High School will provide the three R's necessary for success: Rigor, Relevance and Relationships. The school will be a small, academically rigorous diploma-granting high school that combines the expertise of Our Piece of the Pie® - best practices in the youth development and workforce development fields - along with the skills of Hartford Public Schools - the rigor of the classroom and high school requirements. School governance will be shared equally between the school system and OPP®. OPPportunity High School enrolls over-aged and under-credited youth, those who are 18 or younger, have at least one year of high school, but not enough credits to go on to 10th grade, and are motivated to get a high school diploma.⁵

There are additional small learning communities/academies with which CWP and HOYS work, such as the Hartford High School Government and Law Academy designed for students with an interest in pursuing a career in law, government or community leadership⁶.

Child Welfare

OPP® has a strong working relationship with the Department of Children and Families helping youth aging out of the foster care system through a program called the Connecticut Youth Opportunity Strategy. OPP®'s Pathways to Success program is designed to insure that youth aging out of foster care have increased opportunities to provide for a successful transition to adulthood in the following areas: youth leadership, youth engagement, employment, housing, and physical and mental health. Community-based agencies are contracted by the Department of Children and Families to provide various services to foster care youth. OPP®'s youth development specialists and DCF workers work collectively to provide updates and progress reports as well as overall general case management support. The youth development specialist's role also is to provide DCF worker and other care providers an assessment of career skills, interests and aptitudes of the youth to better assist in goal planning. This working relationship between the youth development specialist and DCF worker continues to play an integral role in making sure foster care youth are successful in terms of reaching their outcome goals.

The CT Youth Opportunity Strategy offers youth ages 14 to 21 with present involvement in foster care the opportunity to be part of a major national effort to help youth in foster care make a successful transition to adulthood by providing them with opportunities through Opportunity Passport™. Through the Opportunity Passport™ program, participants receive a match savings account, known as an Individual Development Account (IDA), to be used for purchasing specific assets. The participants also receive a 1:1 match up to \$1,000 and all participants receive financial literacy training, which helps the youth become financially literate by gaining experience with the banking system, and saving money for education, housing, healthcare, and other life expenses.

The participants enrolled in OPP®'s CT Youth Opportunity Strategy program benefit from a menu of services and supports such as health care, housing, transportation assistance, health and wellness and mental health referrals, educational planning, connection to caring adults, community service opportunities, case management services, financial counseling, referrals for internal and external programming, job placement assistance, pre-employment training, work readiness, internships and job retention with on-site job support, and monetary incentives for positive participation. These services enhance life chances of foster youth transitioning from care and prepare them for the future workforce and adulthood.

Juvenile Justice

To address the issue of youth violence in Hartford, The Hartford Office of Youth Services (HOYS) implemented an initiative called Peacebuilders, which is a collaborative effort of OPP®, Compass, The Village and the City of Hartford. Peacebuilders’ staff partner with the Hartford Police Department and St. Francis Hospital to work with families in the emergency room and treatment settings. Because of OPP®’s experience working with the Court Support Services Division and the Prisoner Reentry Program and the deep connections the Peacebuilders have with the community, they are able to work on a street level to quell violence, prevent retaliation and help youth and families process grief in the immediate aftermath of an incident. They also work to connect families to additional community services and supports. The trust that Peacebuilders’ staff have built often provides them with access to information about violent acts and allows them to intervene and prevent additional acts of violence. Since the initiative began in 2007, Peacebuilders have engaged 358 youth in the program and have mediated 44 conflicts involving youth on the caseload and in almost all of those instances, have prevented additional retaliation and/or violence⁷.

Also supported by HOYS is Street Smarts to Business Smarts grant program where 14 to 19 year old disconnected youth who are truant, deemed at risk for violence or delinquency activity, and/or has been identified as needing intervention, participate in a community-based training program and are linked to a small businessperson in a mentor/mentee relationship with the potential of a paid internship. With GED, academic and youth development support and entrepreneurial training and guidance as key components to the program, HOYS’ expectation is that all grantees prepare youth for success in postsecondary and the workforce⁸.

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¹ Kids Count 2007 Data, the Annie E. Casey Foundation Web site, <http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/KIDSCOUNT.aspx>.

² Capital Workforce Partners, Career Competency System, PowerPoint presentation.

³ *Hartford Connects, A Budding ETO City*, Capital Workforce Partners, Hartford Office of Youth Services, PowerPoint presentation.

⁴ Our Piece of the Pie Web site, http://www.opp.org/youth_businesses.asp.

⁵ OPPportunity High School summary document, provided by Bob Rath, OPP®, March, 2009.

⁶ Hartford Public Schools, Hartford High School Government and Law Academy Web site, <http://www.hartfordschools.org/schools/Hartford-Public-High-School-Law-and-Government-Academy.php>.

⁷ Peacebuilders Report, *Year One*, provided by Hartford Office of Youth, February 2009.

⁸ *Street Smarts to Business Smarts*, Request for Proposal, 2008.

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