

THINK OUTSIDE THE WALLS

CREDIBLE MESSENGERS



Who they are and what they do

In juvenile justice work, a credible messenger is someone with a similar background to youth in the system, often a person who has been in the justice system. This specific term describes something quite common. If you have a problem with your child's teacher, your first confidant will likely be another parent – probably one whose child attended the same school. You will value that person's insight far more than advice offered by your childless college roommate who attended private boarding schools. Twelve-step programs also work on this principle: The best person to help you is someone who has travelled the same road.

History

The first use of the term “credible messenger” we can find is in the writings of Black Panther Eddie Ellis, who was incarcerated at New York's Green Haven Prison. Ellis said that returning prisoners should play a role in helping young people to avoid incarceration.¹ Ellis argued that credible messengers were particularly important in communities where adult role models were in short supply because of mass incarceration.

How they work today

Credible messengers who serve as mentors typically engage young people for an extended period. They may work with a group of youth, creating a positive community that engages in activities such as vocational training, community service or restorative justice. While Ellis and other early credible messengers were typically volunteers, today many work for non-profits and receive training that helps them serve youth and begin a period of professional development. Hiring credible messengers returns resources and opportunity to a community whose lack of both feeds into high incarceration rates.

In Connecticut

There are a number of credible messenger mentoring programs in Connecticut, including Streetsafe Bridgeport (a program of our parent organization RYASAP) that works to prevent gun and gang violence.

The Judicial Branch is participating in a program for “influencers,” credible messengers who are already connected to youth, as relatives, coaches,

¹ Austria, Rubin and Peterson, Julie. Credible Messenger Mentoring for Justice-Involved Youth. The Pinkerton Foundation. January, 2017.
<http://www.thepinkertonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Pinkerton-Papers-credible-messenger-monitoring.pdf>



ministers and so on.² The influencers receive training to help them recognize when a young person's actions or even thinking patterns are creating risky situations, to teaching problem solving, and more. Influencers will themselves get coaching to support them in the vital role they play. Incarceration separates young people from positive influences already at play in their lives – this program is designed to support and strengthen those influences.

Effect on youth

Young people who engage with credible messenger mentors are less likely to be rearrested and more likely to achieve positive milestones.

- In the national Ready4Work program, people returning to their communities from prison who worked with a credible messenger mentor were twice as likely to get a job as others in the program.³
- They were 35 percent less likely to return to prison than others in the program.
- ROCA serves 17-to-24-year-old men referred by the Mass. criminal justice system with a range of programming – all based upon forming a strong relationship with an adult mentor. After two years in the program, 87 percent had no new arrests and no new charges.⁴ These young men are considered high risk, with a history of violence.
- Youth Advocate Program employs people from the young people's communities, often adults who themselves have experience in the juvenile or adult justice systems. According to a John Jay College evaluation, 86 percent of participating youth remained arrest-free while in the program.⁵

What youth say

The Alliance and Youth First Initiative held listening sessions with youth throughout the state who had been involved with the juvenile justice system.⁶ These young people were emphatic that they want to be around adults who want to be around them and who understand and have been through the circumstances that the youth are confronting. They also noted that mentors

² See https://www.uc.edu/corrections/services/trainings/effective_practices_in_community_supervision/epicsitrainingoverview.html

³ Bauldry, Sean, et. al. Mentoring Formerly Incarcerated Adults: Insights from the Ready4Work Reentry Initiative. Public/Private Ventures. Ready4Work Reentry Initiative http://ppv.issuelab.org/resource/mentoring_formerly_incarcerated_adults_insights_from_the_ready4work_reentry_initiative

⁴ ROCA. Fiscal Year 2016. High Risk Young Men Performance Benchmarks and Outcomes Report. <http://rocainc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/fy16-young-men-outcomes-report.pdf>

⁵ Evans, D., PhD, & Delgado, S., MA. Most High Risk Youth Referred to Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. Remain Arrest Free and in their Communities During YAP Participation. John Jay College of Criminal Justice. New York, NY: Research and Evaluation Center part of the research consortium of John Jay College, Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. 2014. <https://jjrec.les.wordpress.com/2011/07/yapfacts201401.pdf>

⁶ Faruqee, Mishi and Anderson, Abby. Walk in Our Shoes. 2017. www.ctjja.org/resources/pdf/YFCTpaper.pdf



and communities benefit as well, because these programs create career track jobs.

An alternative to incarceration

Despite the demonstrated success of credible messengers in keeping high-risk youth out of trouble, our thinking is still stuck on prisons. A thorough and validated risk assessment could identify the rare young person who must be in a locked facility for public safety. But the experience of many states suggests that a robust system of community-based programming – including credible messenger mentoring – could drastically reduce the number of young people that Connecticut incarcerates.

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Think Outside the Walls is a series of issue briefs that will educate the public about how best practice and research shows we can help high-need youth succeed.