

MIDDLESEX COUNTY ALTERNATIVES TO DETENTION



An excerpt from YAP's Policy & Advocacy Center publication *Safely Home*

Middlesex County YAP runs two alternative to detention programs, CRIS (Community Re-Integration Services) and DAP (Detention Alternatives Program). In partnership with Judge Roger Daley (Ret.), Program Director, Melissa Ortiz, heavily involved in local juvenile justice coalitions and advocacy, grew the program in direct response to the needs of the community. Today, Melissa continues that work with the Middlesex County Family Court.

One of the community's strengths was its youth and their potential; and one challenge was the number of youth who were gang involved and engaged in destructive behaviors. Integrating principles of positive youth development and youth leadership, YAP Advocates (paid street workers) worked with Melissa and the youth to create the Pathways gang intervention group to complement individual services in the CRIS and DAP programs.

Pathways serves as a support, education and skills group for the youth who choose to participate. In the group setting the youth and the Advocates are equals, everyone is responsible for their own behavior and together they decide what the group will discuss.

In one session, the youth and Advocates worked together and asked: how could rival gang members hate each other so much but be unable to look one another in the eye (even in group, they would look down at the ground when talking to rival gang members)? They realized they didn't know why they hated each other. It didn't change everything - rival gang members were still rival gang members - but they began to look out for each other because they had a sense of community based on their shared experiences.



They also focused on what they had in common, explored the underlying issues that led them to join their respective gangs in the first place, learned job training skills, and practiced improving social skills. For one youth, the Pathways group and fidelity to the concepts of seeing value and strengths in everyone and retaining hope, even in difficult and emotional situations proved to be critical.

Judge Daley sent a 16-year old young man, J.A., to the CRIS program. J.A. identified as a member of the Bloods street gang in New Brunswick and was in court for vandalizing a Jewish cemetery in New Brunswick. J.A. had multiple difficulties with relationships at home and in the community. He suffered from severe ADHD (although was not on medication), struggled with reading, had been kicked out of

multiple schools, and exhibited violent behavior. He lived at home with his mother and his stepfather, and although his father lived nearby, they did not have a relationship.

One day, while at the Pathways program J.A. received a telephone call informing him that his house was raided and his family members were taken into custody. His stepfather had been selling and trafficking drugs out of the home. In addition the young man's beloved dogs were killed in the process. J.A. was devastated.

He feared being homeless- he had no relationship with his father and his mother and stepfather were in jail. YAP helped to reconnect him with his father and uncle and stabilize his living situation. Recognizing the bond between this young man and his mother, YAP took him to court for her hearings and offered emotional support throughout the entire process.

He continued to participate in YAP services and particularly in the Pathways program. He took a leadership role within the group and from time to time ran group sessions on his own. During this difficult time he was able to fulfill one of his ultimate goals - graduating high school. He now has a job in a warehouse and is stable, living with his father and serving as a peer mentor to other youth in his community. Although he was at risk of being in detention, the judge gave him a chance to succeed in the community. By working with other youth, getting support in a crisis and being connected to family, J.A. was able to overcome some intense obstacles.

J.A. was not an exception. Middlesex County YAP's alternative to detention programs are successful in keeping high-risk and high-potential youth in the community and out of detention, especially youth of color, who make up the majority (86%) of the youth in these programs. Of all the youth in the program, 90% were not arrested while in the program. Of those contacted post-discharge, 87% had remained arrest free 12 months after leaving YAP.

Source: Internal YAP outcome data for Middlesex County CRIS and DAP Programs, 01.01.11-12.31.13

