

# Youth Working for Change: A Collaborative Approach to Providing Employment Opportunities to Marin County Youth Offenders

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At-risk youth who are involved in the legal system have a greater number of internal and external challenges that inhibit their potential and ability to benefit from opportunities to start building a positive career path. Research indicates that employment mentorship is one possible solution to prevent violence and help youth stay on a forward moving track. Fortunately, at the federal level, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) has recognized the need for at-risk youth to have tailored services that assist in providing basic employment skills while exposing youth to job training and providing job placements. At the state level, the Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act (JJCPA) was created to provide stable and ongoing funding to local juvenile justice programs that are effective in reducing crime rates among juveniles.

In 2012, utilizing JJCPA funding, the Marin County Juvenile Probation Division in collaboration with the Marin Employment Connection established the Youth Working for Change Program (YWC). With an employment counselor imbedded in Juvenile Probation, YWC focuses on providing vocational assessments, communication and work readiness skills, and supportive services to probation youth. Through collaboration with a diverse group of employers throughout the county, youth have the opportunity to be placed in paid internships, job shadowing, and unsubsidized employment. This case study examines YWC and how Napa County can augment and streamline current youth employment services by adopting YWC's comprehensive and inclusive program design.

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## Background

You cannot obtain employment without experience; and you cannot get experience without a job. This is the conundrum many youth experience as they gear up to attempt to break into the workforce for the first time in their lives. Even though this is a difficult reality for American teens in general, youth who are involved with the juvenile justice system face further obstacles even after they have served their sentence, as the opportunities for them to obtain paid employment are scarce, and for some, nonexistent. *The New York Times* (2014) reported on a study by Criminologist Professor, Sara Heller, from the University of Pennsylvania, who shared that research indicates that employment paired with mentorship is one possible solution to prevent violence among at-risk and disadvantaged youth. She identified youth employment programs that engage mentors to help troubled youth stay on track as a strong link with a significant reduction in arrest for violent crimes. The success of these programs is attributed to the dedicated mentors who provide crucial guidance to help youth perform on the job and assist to regulate any disruptive behavior that could affect employment status. Studies further indicate there is strong evidence showing that marriage and holding a stable job creates desistance from re-offending for at-risk male youth (NIJ).

Fortunately, in the State of California, the Crime Prevention Act of 2000 created the Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act (JJCPA) as a means to provide local juvenile justice programs a stable source of

funding to target delinquency among at-risk youth. The JJCPA's primary focus is to create collaboration between the state, local officials, and community-based organizations. A requirement of the JJCPA legislation is for the replication of techniques and strategies demonstrating evidence of effectiveness in curbing juvenile delinquency within programs being funded. Accordingly, at the federal level the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) has allowed for the creation of local and specific employment and training services for youth who have faced barriers in their efforts to obtain employment, or are at-risk and/or have low-income status. More recently, employment services have been enhanced by the new Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Becoming effective July 2015, WIOA updates and streamlines the out-of-date (WIA). WIOA will fund state and local workforce initiatives and provide a comprehensive array of job training services for youth, including youth with disabilities and youth offenders as it is inclusive and accommodating of their legal status.

In 2012, the Marin County Juvenile Probation Division, in collaboration with the Employment and Training branch of social services, created the Youth Working for Change Program (YWC). In accordance with the JJCPA and WIA, YWC is an employment program designed to target at-risk youth in the Marin County juvenile dependency system. YWC exposes youth to a tailored job training program that provides communication and job readiness skills in

preparation for internships, subsidized and unsubsidized employment, as well as career-building. This case study examines YWC and how Napa County can consider Marin County's innovative strategies and efforts at engaging one of the most vulnerable populations.

### **Marin County, Youth Working for Change Program (YWC)**

The Juvenile Division of the Marin County Probation Department stresses three distinct "pillars" in its work with youth and families. The first pillar is accountability, as the Probation Department has an obligation to the community to victims and to the youth and families to ensure that perpetrators of acts of delinquency are held accountable for their actions. The primary task associated with this pillar is enforcing conditions of probation, such as obtaining restitution in order to make victims whole, drug testing youth, ensuring their attendance at school, completion of community service work, and ensuring that they do not continue to be delinquent. A second pillar of the work is to provide referrals to appropriate treatment programs so that the issues and challenges that usually are underlying an act of delinquency can be addressed. The third, final, and less well known pillar of juvenile justice work in Marin County is that of opportunity. Many youth who are caught up in juvenile justice system lack the opportunities to find alternatives to delinquency, such as sports, arts, or entertainment. Kevin Lynch, Director of the Juvenile Division of the Marin County Probation Department, envisioned a vocational program such as YWC to provide a vocational opportunity for youth to develop job skills, meaningful work experience, and ultimately self-confidence and independence.

In line with the County of Marin's mission and vision to provide interventions that are directed at reducing ethnic disparities and disproportionalities, Marin's Juvenile Justice Division teamed up with the Employment and Training Branch of Social Services to meet the gap in employment and mentoring services for the youth in juvenile probation. YWC was

designed to fulfill the desperate options for youth in juvenile probation who need mentorship, supportive employment services, and clear guidance to learn the basic skills to go out into the community and obtain a job. YWC gives youth the opportunity to gain self-esteem and real-life experience that helps them discover potential vocational interests.

### **YWC Partnerships and Collaboration**

One of the many reasons YWC is a successful program is the different partnerships that take place in order to sustain the program and youth participation. The primary collaboration and strong relationship is between the Juvenile Probation Division and the Marin Employment Connection (MEC). This partnership is the perfect match between a steady and consistent funding source with a high-need--Juvenile Probation--and the MEC, which under WIA/WIOA provides the supervision of the employment development counselor and administration of the YWC program. Another partnership highlighted is the multi-agency collaboration of the Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council (JJCC). As a legislative requirement of the JJCPA, the JJCC is led by the county's Chief Probation Officer, and its members include leaders from law enforcement, education, social services, and community-based organizations. Each county determines how to invest its allocated funds to best serve its own unique population. Special emphasis is placed in the local partnership and planning process to identify the most effective ways to address juvenile crime in each individual county. The third integral partnership that helps YWC to continue to be the opportunity ladder it has become is the collaboration between YWC and the community. The community is composed of several businesses, employers, and internship sites throughout Marin County that open their doors to the probation youth who have voiced a special employment interest or vocational curiosity. It is their vote of confidence to provide work experience and vocational skill acquisition to give probation youth hope for a successful future.

## YWC Funding

Since June 2012 when YWC was initiated, it has been funded in its entirety by the JJCPA. The funding Marin County receives for YWC is devoted to its operation and supportive services. This includes the salary for a full-time employment counselor, internship stipends, job readiness programs, employment subsidies, and other supportive services such as transportation, gift cards, tools or other needs that if unmet would represent a barrier to employment for the youth.

## YWC Structure

The juvenile probation officers (PO) are the first to identify and refer potential candidates for the YWC program. Eligible youth are any and all youth who are referred to the juvenile probation division and have been ordered to formal, informal, or summary probation and have completed their mandated community service hours. The program places special emphasis on youth who are assessed to be at high risk for recidivism. POs report, what they look for in a youth for referrals to YWC is motivation, responsibility, commitment to their individual treatment programs, and a desire to learn something new. Employment counselor, Dan Daniels, who is co-located at juvenile probation, meets, evaluates, and assesses readiness for employment with each identified youth. Through the process, he keeps in close communication with the PO, and vice versa, as both make sure the youth has all the support s/he needs in order to be successful in obtaining employment. Once a youth has been determined eligible for the program, Mr. Daniels conducts a vocational and job-readiness assessment, and along with the youth, develops a plan to address identified barriers to employment. The youth is then enrolled in a seven-week job readiness curriculum lead by Mr. Daniels called, "Working it out." The curriculum provides youth with the skills necessary to both obtain and maintain employment. Youth learn skills in the areas of open communication, anger management, distress tolerance, and the steps to be successful in interactions with co-workers and supervisors. For youth who have an Individual

Educational Plan, YWC connects them with one-on-one assistance for vocational services. YWC connects probation youth who have financial hardships with the local program "Image for Success" that provides quality professional clothing for youth to wear during the interview process.

A unique aspect of YWC is its flexibility in providing a variety of employment opportunities and employment subsidies. Because not all probation youth are ready for employment, YWC has created three different employment categories: internships, subsidized employment, and regular paid employment. Youth who participate in the 60-hour internships, are required to sign an internship agreement where the intern, business site supervisor, and the YWC representative agree with the goals and expectations of the internship. Successful completion of an internship doesn't preclude youth from beginning a second and third internship until they are ready to assume the responsibility of paid employment. In subsidized employment, YWC covers the "on the job training" for youth in identified employment sites. Subsidized employment offers employers the ability to defer the cost of training a new employee while the youth learns the skills for a new trade. Finally, paid employment is the most popular form of employment for this program. The program currently has made positive connections with approximately 40 different public and private businesses in Marin County. Some employers have hired several probation youth and look to Mr. Daniels for additional help when recruiting. With its mission to reduce disparities and provide equal opportunity to marginalized populations, YWC also offers employment opportunities for undocumented probation youth with real-life experience that can help them identify a career goal. Gift cards are used as compensation for completion of a successful internship to all undocumented youth who engage in employment. An essential aspect of this program is the matching between the youth and the employment category as well as the specific employer or internship site. Through the comprehensive employment assessment, Mr. Daniels is able to identify the youth's interest and vocational curiosity.

Assessments are also utilized to match employers who are willing to train and open the opportunity for the youth to learn and feel part of a positive and rewarding experience. He mentors the youth and acts as a bridge between them and perspective employers. As an active, relentless, and innovative job developer, Mr. Daniels strives to ensure he makes strong and positive relationships with the community, and is always looking for new employment opportunities for the youth he serves.

### **YWC Outcomes**

YWC is a new program approaching its third anniversary of existence in Marin County Juvenile Probation this upcoming summer. According to the interdepartmental MOU between Marin Employment Connection and the Juvenile Probation Department, the expected program outcomes were: 50 youth will be referred to YWC and undergo a vocational assessment; 35 will complete the job readiness curriculum; 25 will obtain employment as a result of their participation in YWC; and 20 will maintain employment for at least 3 months. Also it was expected that 75 % of youth placed in subsidized positions must be at high risk for recidivism. To date, the program reports that 233 cases have been referred since June 2012. Of those, 62 cases were closed successfully. These were cases where the youth completed an internship, have obtained paid employment, and complied with their terms and conditions set by the court. 55 cases were not open, as they were not appropriate referrals for the program. The remaining 116 were closed unsuccessfully due to the youth not being committed to the program, unable to follow through, or having re-offended and been detained.

### **Recommendations for Napa County**

“It takes a village to raise a child,” is the clear message coming from the work Marin County is doing with its probation youth. The collaboration and supportive environment created for high risk youth in the probation system is paying off, as evidenced by a significant number of youth in Marin County moving towards self-sufficiency. Napa County Juvenile

Probation Department’s current practice involves a system of programs including Workforce Napa (WFN), which is a program under Napa County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) and Voices, a local nonprofit youth center focused on assisting Napa youth with housing, employment, and other services aimed at self-sufficiency. While the employment services that Napa Juvenile Probation youth are exposed to through WFN and Voices are essential employment resources, youth have to navigate through separate programs before being connected with a potential employer. In the current structure, each program is working in siloes, resulting in minimal communication and collaboration between the POs, Voices’ job coaches, and WFN. Moreover, one cannot ignore the growing number of undocumented youth within Napa County, who are not being served by these programs. Similar to Marin County’s vision to close the gaps in disproportionalities for underserved or unserved populations, Napa County HHSA is devoted to improving how social determinants of health are being addressed. At-risk youth in the probation system fall into several categories predicting health disparities. The following recommendations are based on Marin County’s YWC and are suggested as possible steps for Napa Juvenile Probation, WFN, and Voices to consider as an avenue to attend to some of the disparities that at-risk youth in Napa County are experiencing. They include:

- Job coaches serving probation youth should be co-located at Juvenile Probation in order to centralize and expedite the employment process. Having the job coach/employment mentor connect with the youth and the probation officer creates an efficient flow that is easy for the youth to respond to, follow through, and be more accountable towards.
- The employment coach should have a full-time employee who can share some of the responsibilities outlined during this case study by providing more coordination and face-to-face contact with the youth in the assessment and matching

phase of the program. Ideally, one of the two employment staff should be bilingual – Spanish-Speaking, given that the Latino population is the largest minority represented in the Juvenile Probation population in Napa. The fiscal impact for this position can be absorbed by reviewing current cost of contracting employment services to Voices and redefining roles in WFN in order to maximize service delivery.

- An incentive employment skills program for undocumented youth should be added to the current supportive services that are being offered to youth involved with the probation system. Incentives, such as gift cards, educational credits, employment classes, and certificates, should be provided to undocumented youth. These services can assist them in overcoming interpersonal challenges, assertively handling stressful situations, and learning to problem solve in a work environment. Cost would be minimal as most of these incentives can be added to services already being provided to other youth.
- The Napa Youth Employment program should work closely with the HHSA Quality Management division in order to develop an evaluation process with a clear list of outcome measures to be achieved. The effectiveness of the interventions being applied, could be highlighted as well as provide transparency about which populations are being successful and which ones are struggling or not represented.
- Acknowledgment of the youth is important, and it can be done through providing them with a certificate of completion and successful participation. These youth should be encouraged to share their experience with potential candidates. Peer-to-peer influence can have a lasting impact in a youth.
- WFN and Voices would benefit from hosting a network for all participating employers. This network would focus on the exchange of tools that were successful or did not work too well.

This would facilitate a supportive environment for employers to collectively continue to support not only the youth they employ but also the program overall.

Although it can be daunting to think of creating a new program, the basis for the program is in place. The investment in Napa's youth employment is one that the entire community can capitalize on. The collaboration that this project requires allows for the community to be active participants in helping government officials apply the funds intended for at-risk youth. By providing the structure and teaching youth how to be self-sufficient we are working towards reducing recidivism and building a skilled and experienced workforce for the future.

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