



Background

When offered an opportunity, children and young offenders are more open to influences that promote positive change. As evident from research, constructive feedback, guidance, and advice from mentors can play a critical role in shaping the mental and emotional development of juveniles .

Criminal justice procedures that are overly punitive towards young and developing minds may create hurdles in rehabilitation and their paths to community reentry. A very positive development is that increasingly state agencies and not-for-profit organizations are realizing that creating learning and mentoring systems can help support rehabilitation, prevent recidivism, and thereby enhance public safety. An example of new mentoring initiatives in this area is the Credible Messenger Program.

The concept of the program is very aptly described in the Credible Messenger Justice Center’s vision statement that aims “To foster authentic partnerships between justice systems and communities that reduces incarceration and recidivism by engaging the whole individual in relationships of lasting change, investing in community-based resources, and changing the way that government and society view the value and potential of justice-involved people.”

The approach of credible messenger mentoring programs involves personality transformation in terms of influencing the thinking, disposition, perspective, and attitude of prisoners towards life and the community. In this model, people who experienced criminal justice involvement and had successfully rehabilitated in society are hired as “credible messengers,” to help incarcerated individuals in their reentry journeys. That is, successfully rehabilitated people help individuals who are still involved in the juvenile justice system through personal and empathetic relationships that are based on a shared knowledge and understanding. It provides avenues for young offenders to learn from the lived experiences of their credible messenger mentors.

Shaping a national movement

Transformative Mentoring Programs are emerging throughout the United States. The term “credible messenger” was first used in the writings of Black Panther Eddie Ellis, ex-offender incarcerated at New York Green Haven Prison, who suggested, “... returning prisoners should play a role in helping young people to avoid incarceration.” The first credible messenger initiative was launched in the criminal justice system within the last decade and became prevalent upon its successful implementation and evaluation. The earliest model of a credible messenger program was established in New York City in 2013 at the Department of Probation—Arches Transformative Mentoring for young criminals. Evaluation studies indicated a 50% decrease in recidivism among juveniles who participated in the treatment program.

A pioneer in establishing and enhancing the impact and scope of the credible messenger program has been the Credible Messenger Justice Center. They have served as an incubator for Credible Messenger programs in other communities, offered

community organizations their support for launching new programs, and helped recruit credible messengers as mentors.

Various research studies have evaluated the effectiveness of this intervention and reported that recidivism rates have decreased significantly with the range varying from 34% to 76% in different jurisdictions across the nation.

The program success in NYC's Department of Probation led to its replication in public housing for vulnerable youth and is now expanding nationally, including Washington DC's program at the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, San Diego's

Probation Department, Camden County, New Jersey Department of Corrections, and many others. Within New York city, 4 mentoring programs – Arches, Next STEPS, 4As, and AIM -- are available to various participants aged 13 to 24 for services ranging from group mentoring and mentoring development to advocacy, and to advanced mentoring. These programs have successfully engaged over 2, 500 justice -involved youth. Arches is a 6-month curriculum-based group mentoring program to generate positive decision-making and behavior change among ex-offenders, as well as, to help them re-enter their communities by having access to gainful employment, education, and rehabilitative health and community services. Next STEPS is a transformative one-on-one, as well as group, mentoring program focusing on young adults aged 16-24 who are actively engaged in violent crime. While 4As, Arches Alumni Academy for Advancement, focuses on offering stipend-paid leadership development among mentors. AIM (Advocate Intervene Mentor) focuses on providing intensive mentoring to 13-18 years old youth on probation. A unique element of AIM is the advocacy role these mentors play in garnering community resources to support their young participants.



Similarly in Washington D.C., the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) launched the program in 2015. Part of the program consists of regular interaction between mentors-and mentees through outings mentors host for youth over hot meals. During the sessions, the mentoring topics may include education and employment as pathways to a better future as well as social and psychological issues facing the youth engaged in the juvenile justice system.

The growth in Credible Messenger Program: Credible messenger Movement (CM3)

A major recent movement to grow the Credible Messenger program nationwide was provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, working in collaboration with the Public Welfare Foundation, and the W. Haywood Burns Institute, among others. In September 2021, this collaborative group of institutions launched CM3-- Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement aimed at supporting youth on probation by identifying and helping adopt best intervention practices through peer learning networks. As a not-for-profit organization CM3 aims to, "...help youth and families break the cycle and long-term impact of justice system involvement by supporting and advancing credible messenger initiatives in the communities across the nation most impacted by the justice system."



Not only will the CM3 movement engage in expanding transformative mentoring, but it will also serve as an instrument shaping justice policy by facilitating restorative and rehabilitative treatment to ex-offenders as well helping them feel empowered to positively change their life. According to Clinton Lacey, the president and CEO of CM3 a public-private partnership, "The intention is for the mentors to have a transformative impact on the individual, family, community and systemic levels. The mentors go beyond deescalating situations on the streets to actively helping young people build full-fledged life plans that encompass housing, health, positive outlets and more."

Characteristics of credible messengers

The ex-offenders who are selected to participate as mentors undergo rigorous training for transformative mentoring of young offenders. A collaborative effort for providing training services at the national level is led by the leaders having history of criminal activities working in tandem with human right activists at the Incarcerated Nation Credible Messenger Institute, a non-profit

organization. The institute is dedicated to the mission of reducing mass incarceration and recidivism among youth. Credible messengers are trained in a wide range of areas to cover the entire spectrum of issues associated with offenders' circumstances, mental conditions, and the impact of suffering. The primary focus of the training curriculum is teaching restorative justice, life path planning, the art and science of hope, brain development, and accessing the needs of prisoners impacted by the repercussions of trauma and mental illness. The training program also includes crisis intervention and conflict resolution to handle and de-escalate crisis situations and help offenders in developing control over aggression.



AEC Foundation

Ideal attributes for Credible messengers include those who are:

- Experienced in a deepen commitment for continuous improvement
- Hopeful for positive transformation
- Available in serving as a supportive network
- Serve as role models and innate leaders among inmates during their journeys, and
- Have a motivational persona

Positive Impacts of intervention

Credible mentoring is a tool for accomplishing one of the objectives of the justice system; to reduce rearrest in the future. Best practices in juvenile justice reform is built on a foundation of implementing evidence-based practices. Credible Mentoring programs are based on evidence-informed curriculum. The evidence reported by assessment studies of intervention outcomes indicates that credible messenger programs have been highly enriching and impactful as a robust way of boosting rehabilitation services. These programs prevent recidivism in two ways. First, providing employment opportunities for ex-offenders and engaging them in helping inmates, makes their rehabilitation more long-lasting and permanent by giving them a respectable livelihood and self-fulfillment. Second, these mentors become powerful role models for inmates, motivating them to aspire to achieve a more productive and meaningful life. Given the similar experiences of credible messengers in criminal activities in the past life followed by lengthy legal procedures and eventual complete desistance, young offenders build trust with credible messengers due to their ability to appreciate their conditions, feelings, and insecurities. A resulting positively forged relationship between a mentor and an offender seems to have a constructive effect in pushing offenders to aspire to transform their lives and



become successful in their personal, social, and professional fields.

- According to the research reported by the Credible Messenger Justice Center, these programs have been extremely successful in terms of achieving the following specific measurable and concrete outcomes:
- Youth that have worked with messengers are less likely to experience re-arrests, violations, and anti-social behavior.
- Mentored offenders show improved commitment to stay engaged in restorative programs.
- The program helps offenders generate increased compliance with court mandates
- Communities that have established credible messenger programs see better relationships between program participants and their communities
- These mentorship programs build greater restorative justice capacity in the communities

Empathy and Compassion leads the way

Successful implementation of credible messenger mentoring programs confirms that a well-grounded approach to addressing the needs of juveniles with multi-pronged strategies can have significant results. A program that incorporates the human element along with proven legal responses to juvenile delinquency not only reduces future crime but also brings transformative change in behavior and mindset. Additionally, the fact that this approach is dynamically interactive adds to the appeal of adopting such methods because that allows for more agile and quicker responses to challenges faced in offender rehabilitation. Thus, there is a plethora of evidence suggesting that the personalized mentoring approach is effective, efficient, and more humane.

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The Tow Youth Justice Institute is a university, state and private partnership established to lead the way in juvenile justice reform through collaborative planning, training, research and advocacy.

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