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CEO's Young Adult Program: Engaging Formerly Incarcerated Young People in the Workforce

By Alana Gunn and Julie Peterson

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introduction

Disconnected youth and the workforce: an overview

Almost three million 16-to 24-year-olds nationwide are “disconnected”: out of school and out of the workforce, neither employed nor looking for jobs.¹ Some are coming out of jail or prison, others aging out of foster care. Many are already parents themselves.

Their numbers vary starkly by race. Many more African American and Latino young people are disconnected than Non-Hispanic Whites and Asians. African American and Latino youth who have left school hold fewer jobs than young Whites and Asians.

Yet attachment to the workforce at a young age may be the best² predictor of long-term labor market success. If young people do not hold jobs, they are much more likely to enter or remain in government systems – including criminal justice and public assistance.

Such jobs do exist. American industries face growing skill shortages, which can mean well-paying jobs for young, skilled workers.³ How, then, to re-connect the disconnected?

The Center for Employment Opportunities

The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) finds jobs for people returning from prison and jail, to help provide the structure, confidence, and income necessary for them to lead productive lives. CEO began as a demonstration project of the Vera Institute of Justice in the 1970s, seeking to test what would happen if, instead of meeting barriers to employment, people coming home from prison or jail were offered immediate, paid transitional work. The program evolved into CEO’s signature work -experience program, the Neighborhood Work Project, which provides paid, time-limited employment. At the same time, CEO works to place participants in full-time, unsubsidized employment, and follows up with them for a year after placement. CEO became an independent nonprofit in 1996 and during its decade as an independent organization has made 10,000 full-time job placements for formerly incarcerated people.

During transitional work, CEO clients work on crews that provide maintenance, custodial, landscaping, and light repair services to government agencies, which pay CEO for these services. Participants experience – sometimes for the first time in their lives – what it means to get to work on time, take direction from a supervisor, work steadily throughout the day, be appreciated as a co-worker, and express themselves to supervisors and co-workers effectively and respectfully.

After an average of two to three months of transitional work, CEO places people in permanent jobs in industries such as food services, office services, retail, manufacturing and customer service. The positions are usually entry level, but above minimum wage. CEO’s post-placement team then helps participants stay in the workforce, replace lost jobs, and find better jobs as they acquire more experience and skills.

Early results from a random assignment evaluation of CEO, undertaken as part of a larger study of hard-to-employ populations by the independent research group MDRC, show that CEO’s employment-specific intervention experienced within three months after release from prison leads to highly statistically significant reductions in felony convictions and returns to prison⁴, thus fostering safer streets and stronger communities.

ceo's young adult program: the rationale

In 2004, while developing a Business Plan funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, CEO discovered that participants who did not end up being placed in a permanent job tended to leave the program sooner rather than later. Of young CEO participants who left without being placed, 60 percent left within the first two weeks. CEO began to explore how it might more effectively engage young people, keeping them longer in transitional employment and other programming to build skills for permanent unsubsidized jobs.

CEO created its Young Adult Program in 2005, to serve this group: clients, ages 18 to 25, who have little or no employment history or educational background, lack self esteem, positive attitude, maturity, motivation, and/or who have high barriers to regular full-time employment, such as unstable housing or lack of family and peer support.

Young Adult Program: The Participants
About 47 percent of the 18-to 25-year-olds at CEO are enrolled in the Young Adult Program. Youth who have significant work experience or a training certificate are generally exempted. In addition, as a CEO staff member noted, “participants who have a resume, are properly dressed and can carry on a professional conversation with regard to their goals” do not need the special program. Working “off the books” for family or friends is generally not considered substantive work experience for this purpose.⁵

All 18-to 25-year-olds entering CEO each week are instructed to attend an orientation and assessment for the Young Adult Program at the end of the introductory week of pre-employment training, at which time staff members interview each individual for 20 to 40 minutes using a customized assessment tool. Approximately 80 percent of CEO's young adults attend the orientation and about 65 percent of those assessed are enrolled.

Staff members convene as a group with a supervisor to identify which participants can perform successfully in the regular CEO program, and which might instead benefit from the Young Adult Program. “We need to know if they are mature enough to handle upstairs [regular CEO], they can

go to work and operate without a lot of guidance,” explained one CEO staff member. Those young people do not need the Young Adult Program. Stable family life is also a factor. Another staff member noted, “I have guys that start out living at home, and in a month, when they are still not making money, they get thrown out and then their work life falls apart. We need to pay attention to home life, because that will affect their ability to stay on the job.”

Maturity, too, is considered. “When we come across participants who think they know everything and do not feel they need any assistance,” said a staff member, “that is a sign of immaturity. Those are the ones that need the most help.”

Participants in the Young Adult Program are overwhelmingly male (97 percent) and African American or Latino (91 percent), the same as CEO's general population. The average age of a Young Adult Program participant is 22 years-old.⁶ The average highest grade completed for Young Adult participants is 9.77.⁷

young adult program: the approach

CEO's Young Adult Program is tailored to youth with the highest risk of disconnection. As in regular CEO, young adults have a job coach who helps them with job readiness, a job developer who engages in a job search with them, and a transitional work site supervisor. Yet each of these roles is altered to better engage youth in CEO's programming. Job coaches and work site supervisors give more personal counseling. Job developers do extra interview practice with these younger clients.

Specialized Young Adult Programming

Young Adult Program participants spend three days a week at a transitional work site (regular CEO participants work four days), which allows youth two days a week at CEO headquarters, or twice as much time as regular participants. There, youth attend a "Peacemaking Circle," a method of communication CEO adapted from Roca, a youth-serving organization in Chelsea, Massachusetts.⁸ Facilitated by a Young Adult job coach, the circle meetings are generally small (around eight participants) and encourage group problem-solving. Each circle lasts for about one hour. Every participant has the opportunity to speak in turn about current issues they are facing on the job site as well as at home or in the community. The coach and the other participants together help the speaker resolve individual problems.

Youth in the Peacemaking Circles discuss job skills, such as the importance of getting to work on time, communicating with supervisors, appropriate work attire and budgeting. Participating youth are often provided with modest meal vouchers and public transportation subsidies. They say that the weekly circles foster a sense of belonging and feeling cared for, which in turn creates a stronger bond between the participant and the program.

Participants receive individual "job readiness interventions," to address issues that may make it hard to hold on to a full time job, such as unstable housing. The Program also has an open door policy: the Young Adult job coaches are "on-call" and participants can call or drop into the office whenever they have a problem. Even after Young Adult participants are transitioned into regular CEO, they continue working with their Young Adult job coach.

Participants in the Young Adult Program also have access to a center at CEO where they are welcome anytime during business hours. The room was designed based on suggestions from program participants and has computers, a television and couches. Snacks are also available. Young Adult participants are encouraged to spend time there on non-work days as well as during lunch breaks, and before and after work on days they report to transitional employment.

Transitional Work

The Young Adult Program has its own transitional work sites, specially designed to engage young people. While regular CEO participants have to sign up themselves for a work site, and may work on a different site each week, young adult participants are automatically assigned to and guaranteed a slot at a Young Adult work site during their four weeks in the specialized program.

Young Adult work site supervisors are selected for their enhanced teaching and coaching abilities. Because these sites are separated from the regular population at CEO, site supervisors have a better opportunity to get to know and engage the participants. They also spend more time coaching proper workplace behavior than the site supervisors in the regular CEO program. Young Adult Program site supervisors and job coaches are in daily contact to discuss any issues that arise with participants and to chart their progress.

The culture of the Young Adult work sites tends to be more forgiving. If participants are 10 minutes late to work they are usually allowed to remain on the work site; in the regular program they may be sent home. The workload is often lighter. Instead of work on highways or in public housing buildings, for example, Young Adult crews tend to work inside office buildings, providing janitorial services. The idea is to allow participants to ease in to the workplace and build confidence in them as workers; once they see they can handle simple tasks, they are ready for the greater demands of CEO's regular worksites, and of permanent work afterwards.

Finally, the Young Adult work sites are within walking distance of CEO headquarters to allow and encourage young adult participants to stop by during lunch breaks and before and after work. During these times, participants can meet with their job coach or developer or spend time in the Young Adult Program room.

Job Development

CEO's job developers do not have a specialized Young Adult Program caseload. While they begin working one-on-one with Young Adults in their third or fourth week of the Program, they are engaged with participants and their job coaches from their first day in transitional employment.

One of the Young Adult Program Peacemaking Circles is devoted to a lesson by a job developer on how to write a resume. Another is focused on how to discuss one's conviction and incarceration in a job interview. The job developer role-plays an employer with each participant in the circle while the others observe. While all CEO job developers do this work individually with regular CEO participants, staff members report that doing this exercise in a circle reinforces the lessons learned and is very beneficial for the Young Adult participants. The last person in the circle to role play always gives a much better interview than the first person who does the exercise.

The fact remains that employers often prefer an adult employee and express concerns about the reliability and maturity of young adults. In response, CEO in 2005 began paying job developers a \$100 bonus for placing clients from the Young Adult Program in permanent jobs. This bonus recognizes the extra work that such placements require.

Program Length and Graduation

Participants are encouraged to stay in the Young Adult Program and on CEO's specialized transitional work sites for the full four weeks. They are generally discouraged from seeking a permanent job too quickly for fear that they have not yet developed the skills necessary to retain permanent employment. Nevertheless, participants undergo an informal evaluation after their first two weeks, and those who are deemed job-start ready are

offered a chance to go on job interviews or self-place during their remaining two weeks in the Program.

The last two weeks focus on preparing the participant for full-time employment, and include resume-building, mock interviewing, and addressing any barriers to full-time employment. Participants are again evaluated informally after their fourth week. Those deemed job start ready transition into regular CEO, while others may be allowed to remain in the Young Adult Program for another one to four weeks at the discretion of the job coach and program director. See the box below to see how this staggered assimilation of young adult participants into regular adult programming works in practice.

Transition of Regular Young Adult Participants Into Regular Programming: A Case Study

To see how this staggered assimilation of young adult participants into regular adult programming works in practice, CEO followed nine people who began the Young Adult Program in 2006. Four of the nine participants (44.4 percent) completed the program in the first four weeks. Of the remaining five participants, three were placed in jobs and thus did not need to transition to regular CEO, and a fourth participant returned to school during the fourth week of the program with the approval of his parole officer. CEO discharged a fifth participant during the fourth week of the program due to poor transitional work attendance and performance.

The four participants who completed the program remained active in CEO longer than four weeks. Of these, two were deemed job start ready by the job coach during the four-week evaluation. They transitioned into regular CEO and were sent out on interviews during their fifth week. The remaining two participants were not ready for a job due to unstable living situations that might result in them losing the job shortly after starting it. These two participants remained in the Young Adult Program until their job coach helped resolve the issues and deemed them ready for permanent employment.

young adult program's success

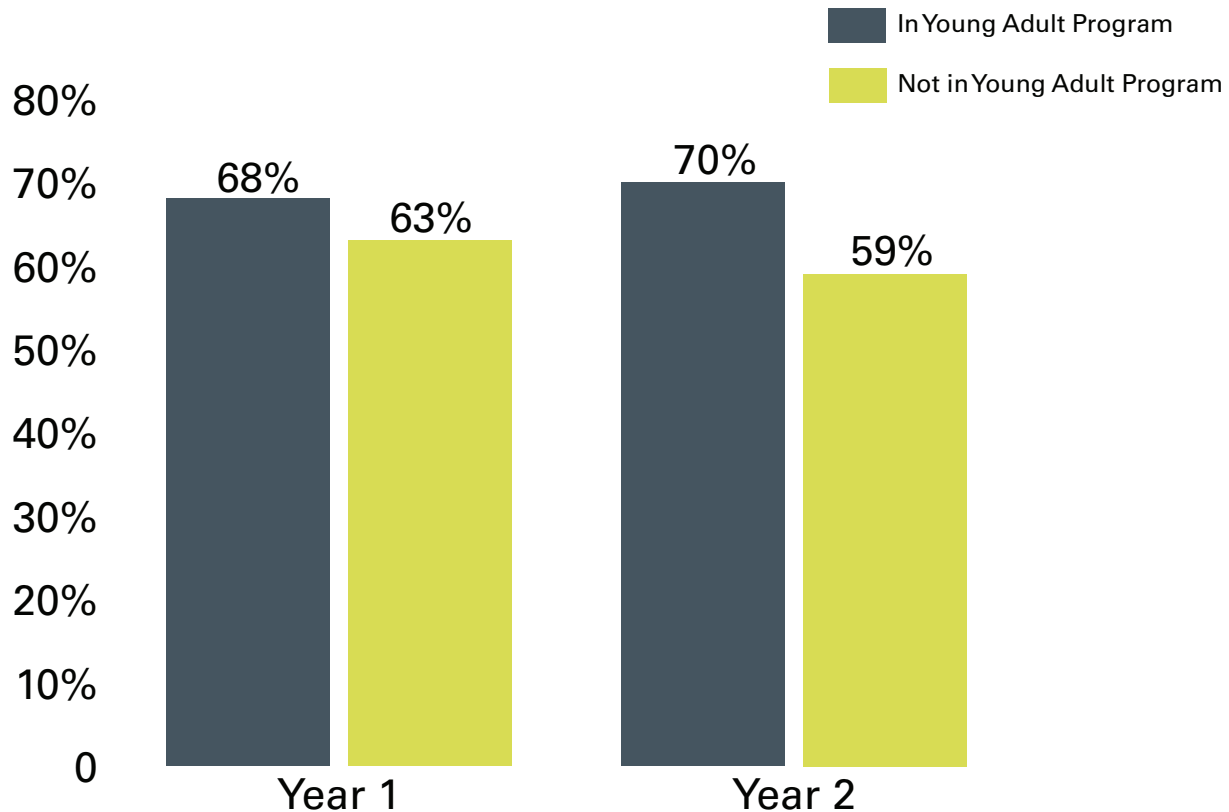
From the outset, the aim of the Young Adult Program was to keep participants engaged at CEO past nine days of transitional work, CEO's early attrition benchmark, in order to ensure that staff would have more time to work with these participants. In 2006 and again in 2007, CEO's research arm, the Learning Institute, compared engagement rates of 18- to 25-year-olds in the Young Adult Program with both a historical sample of CEO clients of the same age who attended prior to the Young Adult Program, and people of the same age who, for various reasons, were not enrolled in the existing Young Adult Program. These analyses suggest that the Young Adult Program is having a significant, positive impact on participant engagement.

Young Adult Program participants were significantly more likely to remain at CEO past nine days of transitional work than young adults who did not participate in the Program. In the first year, 68 percent of the Young Adult Program participants worked more than nine days of transitional work, versus 63 percent of young adults not in the program. By the second year, participants working more than nine days increased to 70 percent, while

among non-program participants, only 59 percent worked nine days or more. By the second year of the Program, Young Adult participants were 1.6 times more likely to work nine days or more in transitional work than young adults who were not in the specialized program (See graph below).

The Program and Job Placements

The Learning Institute's analysis comparing every Young Adult Program participant from the program's inception with a historic sample of CEO participants who were between 18 and 25 years of age before the Young Adult Program was created found that Young Adult Program participants were 1.5 times more likely to be placed in a job than the historic sample. A later analysis, comparing Young Adult Program participants and regular CEO participants ages 18 to 25 between July 1, 2005 and December 21, 2006, found that Young Adult Program participants were 1.4 times more likely to be placed in a job than regular CEO participants of the same age group. While this analysis is not definitive – other factors may also separate the two groups – all these results, taken together, suggest the program is serving its purpose.



lessons learned

We do not know precisely why young adults are staying longer in the Program and at CEO. Conversations with staff and participants, and our observations of the Program, do however suggest some answers:

1) More Attention and Support

The Young Adult services tend to be more accommodating to participants and are more tailored to individual participants' needs. As noted by Program staff, Young Adult participants lack work experience and maturity. Young Adult job coaches strive to provide a nurturing environment as they move them towards being capable of interviewing for a job, getting it, and holding on to it for more than few days. The Young Adult Program orientation, and Peacemaking Circles in particular, appear to create an inclusive environment and reduce skepticism about the program and about entering the workforce.

2) More Accommodating Work Sites

Young people report that they like the way the Program reduces the hassle of getting assigned to a transitional work site. They also like having familiar sites to go to each week. As one participant noted, "When you are young and just getting out you need a little more support, and being guaranteed a job site is very helpful." Young Adult Program transitional work site supervisors are reportedly more patient with participants.

On the other hand, some participants report having a hard time transitioning to the regular CEO work sites at the conclusion of the four-week Young Adult Program. One reported that he "felt like a kid being thrown out of his home," when he transitioned to the regular CEO programming. "I wasn't prepared."

3) More Teaching and Coaching

Young Adult Program staff report that they spend a considerable amount of their time teaching and coaching Young Adult participants. They remind them, again and again, about proper workplace behavior and attire, such as removing their caps in the office and on the work site. Repetition, they believe, is crucial in order for these participants to learn. Staff members work with participants to help them overcome their fears about taking a job and navigating the world of work. They also help participants set realistic expectations about their employment options.

conclusion

The initial evaluation of CEO's Young Adult Program suggests its approach – of providing a more personalized, supportive, coaching environment for young people who are disconnected from the workforce – is successful. By taking a holistic approach, incorporating a more nurturing environment that addresses social as well as employment issues, the Young Adult Program consistently aids disconnected youth with employment. As CEO continues to evaluate and evolve this program, methodologies and results will be shared to provide insight to strategies that link disconnected young people to the workplace.

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references

¹ Fischer, David Jason, "The Chance of a Lifetime," Center for an Urban Future, May 2006.

² Sum, Andrew, "Leaving Young Workers Behind," National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education and Families, 2003.

³ Bloomfield, William, "The Time Is Now: Implementing One System for New York City's Emerging Workforce," New York City's Young Adult Task Force, November 2005.

⁴ These results were presented by Daniel Bloom of MDRC at the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families conference on June 4, 2007. The Powerpoint of the presentation may be requested from Mr. Bloom at dan.bloom@mdrc.org.

⁵ Young adults at CEO who request participation in this program are also generally admitted.

⁶ The average age of regular CEO participants between the ages 18 to 25 is 23 years.

⁷ The average highest grade completed of regular CEO participants ages 18 to 25 was 10.61.

⁸ Roca adopted the Peacemaking Circles from the Tagish Tlingit people in the Yukon Territories.

notes

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Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit organization. For more than 30 years, CEO has been providing immediate, effective and comprehensive employment services to men and women returning home from prison and detention facilities to New York City. Our highly structured and tightly supervised programs help participants regain the skills and confidence needed for a successful transition to a stable, productive life.

