

Program giving juvenile offenders second chance has few openings

by Katy Reckdahl, The Times-Picayune
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Jennifer Zdon/The Times-Picayune

August Collins, left, a caseworker with the Youth Empowerment Project, guides King Sanchez IV, 19, through paperwork Thursday at GED offices on Tulane Avenue. YEP, the region's only re-entry program for teenagers coming home from the state's juvenile facilities, has a waiting list for its services.

Later this month, King Sanchez IV will fly to New York City to speak at a conference about what young men like him need to thrive.

He plans to tell them that New Orleans' Youth Empowerment Project has helped him shake off a tumultuous adolescence. "They don't bite their tongues. They stay on top of me, keep me on my game, push me forward and pick me up," Sanchez, 19, said.

His struggles -- with school failure, grief and other troubles -- are emblematic of many of children in YEP, as the program is known.

"The kids we see have been through hell and back," said Melissa Sawyer, head of the organization, which works with local teens returning from juvenile lockups.

Typical re-entry clients have been convicted of multiple offenses or one serious crime. They come home to struggling families and unstable housing, equipped with -- on average -- a fourth-grade reading level.

As local lawmakers seek to combat violence -- particularly in light of recent shootings in which the suspects are young teenagers -- justice officials say some of the city's most at-risk youths go without adequate services because there is no room in YEP's re-entry program.

The state provides the program \$250,000 a year to serve about 40 young people annually, 25 at a time. Court officials say that amounts to just 20 percent of the number of metro-area youths who come home from detention facilities. But securing more dollars in what promises to be a tumultuous season of state budget cuts will be difficult.

"We don't have enough slots, and we're about to get into our busiest time of the year," said Chief Judge David Bell of Orleans Parish Juvenile Court, who wants YEP's capacity doubled. "Right now they have to wait. And while kids are waiting, that's the period of time that they're committing new offenses."

Shedding recidivism

Researchers have found that, for every dollar invested, successful juvenile programs can save taxpayers \$7 to \$10, most of it in recouped detention costs.

In the year that ended June 30, 67 youths spent nine to 12 months each completing YEP's re-integration program. Of those, 85 percent have managed to steer clear of the juvenile justice system, a near-complete reverse of the 80 and 90 percent recidivism rates that Louisiana saw a decade ago.

Since the Legislature passed the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2003, the state has worked to incarcerate fewer children, provide more services to those who end up under lock and key, and provide more regional and community support for at-risk youth. YEP was born amid that reform push.

Born of tragedy

Sanchez has spent nearly one-third of his life on parole from Juvenile Court.

His first appearance before a judge came at age 13, after he swiped his grandfather's car keys and took a ride. All of his charges have revolved around cars: joy-riding, unauthorized use of a motor vehicle, hit-and-run driving, and a stolen-auto charge.

"I was trying to get away from a lot of things, " and driving felt like an escape, Sanchez said.

The tale is familiar to Sawyer, the YEP director.

In 2004, she was working with the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana to get kids released from juvenile prisons. Within 18 months, six newly released clients were dead, including 21-year-old Wilson Young, who perished with his best friend after crashing a stolen SUV into a tree during a police chase.

Shaken by the tragedies, Sawyer and two partners launched the empowerment project. "YEP was our solution to our sadness, " she said.

Now the organization runs two mentoring programs and a GED-literacy program called NOPLAY.

"Unless something else intervenes, the juvenile system is a feeder system for our adult system, " said former Criminal District Judge Calvin Johnson. "In New Orleans, that 'something else' is YEP."

Down the wrong path

Sanchez says he could have stayed on a dangerous path. He spent time in two juvenile facilities, violated parole, lost a job his youth counselor had arranged for him, failed a urine test because he'd smoked marijuana and got re-arrested.

Then he decided he was too old for youthful "foolishness, " he said. YEP staff helped him get a driver's license, GED instruction, substance-abuse classes and group counseling. They cultivated his leadership skills. Recently, they arranged for individual counseling, helping him come to grips with the 2003 death of his father, after a long illness.

Last week, nearly two years after he was assigned to YEP, it seemed the young man's turmoil finally drew to a close. In what Sanchez called "the happiest day of my life, " Judge Louis Douglas closed his Juvenile Court case.

He was off parole.

"I'm more smart, I'm more mature, " Sanchez said. "And I'm going to try my hardest to stay off the streets and out of trouble."

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