

**Youth Work and Learn at Our Piece of the Pie (OPP):
Findings of the Formative Evaluation of Connecticut's Youth
Development Model**

A Summary of a Report Prepared by the Center for Health, Intervention and Prevention, University of
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Hartford, CT, like so many cities in the United States and around the world, has a large youth population. And, like those cities, the future success of Hartford rests on the success of its young people. At the same time, the majority of Hartford youth live in poor families in neighborhoods that lack the safety, stability, and resources to support its children to grow and prosper.

The goal of Our Piece of the Pie (OPP) is to provide the opportunities and resources for young people to thrive: a) provide Hartford youth 14-24 with a safe harbor from the threats and allures of the streets; b) offer enrolled participants work-based challenges and activities which allow them to experience success and personal growth under the supervision of caring, trained adults; and c) implement programs designed to offer the training, skills-building, support, and assistance needed to complete high school, and enroll in technical programs that offer occupational skill certificates, or obtain 2 or 4 year college degrees, and/or obtain long-term employment. The center piece of these strategies is the development of a caring, adult relationship that is accomplished by assigning every youth to a Youth Development Specialist (YDS).

So, does OPP accomplish these goals? Is the relationship between youth and OPP staff accomplishing its core function of leading youth to more successful and productive lives? Are the services making a difference? The University of Connecticut team¹ conducted an evaluation in 2008 to answer these questions by considering the OPP Pathways program from three perspectives: Which youth are they serving? How well are they serving them? Are they better off?

The evaluators conducted a literature review for relevant/related programs, models, measures, etc. which grounded all of the methods and instruments. Among the models was the most widely-used conceptual framework currently in use, called the “Five Cs 5 C’s model. Drawing from that review, the evaluators adopted several approaches in order to understand the programs and activities in the Pathways program. Specifically the methods included:

- 1) Direct observation of the program (operations, features, and services)
- 2) Informal interviews with program administrative and service staff
- 3) In-depth interviews with a sample of youth participants
- 4) A structured survey (including several validated self-report measures) of youth participant experiences/perceptions of self, community, and program
- 5) Use of existing OPP data containing information about participants, programs, and activities

¹ Preston Britner, Ph.D., Ross Buck, Ph.D., Richard Colon (graduate student in Anthropology), Stephanie Milan, Ph.D., Merrill Singer, Ph.D. (Project Director), and Stephanie Snow (graduate student in Psychology)

Which youth are they serving?

The Pathways program is OPP's primary program for serving youth. 784 youth were served during the year for which the study was conducted. They entered from a variety of referral sources including self-referral, none of which mattered in the degree of success experienced in the program. The basic characteristics of the youth are provided below:

- 418 (54%) females and 358 (46%) male
- 341 (43%) are under 18 and 443 (57%) are over 18
- 429 (55%) were Black
- 270 (34%) were Latino
- 19 (2%) were White
- 63 (8%) other or multi-racial

Other characteristics. Fifty-six percent have at least one barrier to services. The most common barrier is transportation, identified by 358 (46%) of the participants. Other barriers include financial (105, 13%), criminal involvement (66, 8%) and childcare (35, 5%).

Of those served, 146 (18%) were involved in the foster care system and 123 (16%) in the juvenile justice system.

How well are they serving their youth?

The Pathways Cornerstone Activity. Youth average 61 hours of contact with their Youth Development Specialist (their mentor and primary adult contact) during the year, more than an hour per week. Many, 297 (40%), have 1-3 hours per week. The evaluators concluded: *Most youth spend considerable time with their assigned mentor/case worker.* This is particularly important to the quality of the program because this mentoring relationship is the cornerstone of the Pathways program.

Other Pathway Activities. Many youth are also involved in additional activities that are designed to help them reach specific academic and occupational goals.

- Employment programs that provide internships, job readiness and job placement services 168 (21%)
- Youth Businesses Services that provide opportunities to be involved in an engaging activity within a business structure that gives youth an initial sense of the world of work 123 (16%)
- Educational preparation that includes tutoring, SAT preparation, college preparation and college retention 83 (11%)

The activities are well targeted to the needs of youth. Older youth are more involved in employment and college retention related activities and younger youth are more involved in Youth Business Services. Younger youth are also spending more time with the YDS. Overall, OPP successfully creates a positive environment for participants and successfully provides participants with mentorship, training, life and career direction, and support.

Are the youth better off?

There are three markers of program success:

- Moving up a pathway by achieving an educational or occupational goal
- Being placed in a new job
- Attaining an educational promotion including grade promotion, completion of adult education program or finishing a year of college

The following successes were reported by staff:

- 51 youth moved up a pathway during the year
- 54 youth started a new job during the year
- 350 youth had some type of educational promotion during the year

While the majority of youth experience at least one marker of success, the evaluation also asked if there is any link between the activities and their quality and the successes achieved by the participants. The following findings confirm the central role of the YDS and suggest additional value from other program activities.

1. Youth in all three success categories spend more time with their YDS
2. Highest risk youth who move up a pathway spend more time with their YDS
3. Youth who participate in employment services are more likely than similar youth in the program to obtain a job
4. Youth who participate in educational programs are more likely to have an educational promotion
5. Youth who were successful in the program also expressed greater feelings of empowerment

Special Populations

A separate set of analyses focused on those OPP participants with Department of Children and Families (DCF) and Court Support Services/Juvenile Justice (CSS/JJ) involvement. The analyses indicate that these youth are particularly vulnerable compared to those youth with involvement in neither DCF nor CSS/JJ. And, they make up a significant proportion of the most at-risk youth served by OPP.

These participants were overwhelmingly positive about the benefits they derived from their involvement in OPP and the relationship they had with their mentor/case worker. Overall, the participants felt that OPP provided the kind of support, employment and practical skills, and direction that was helping them to make good life decisions for their futures. Differences in their participation in the various program elements (they were less often involved in education activities than other OPP participants) may account for the fact that they were less likely than others to experience an educational promotion. Despite their initial vulnerability, however, CSS/JJ and DCF youth were more likely than other OPP youth to progress over the course of a year.

What are the challenges?

As in any evaluation challenges as well as successes were identified. The most important challenge is related to one of the great strengths of the program, the relationship between the youth and YDS. Two issues were identified. First, the researchers encouraged OPP to promote greater stability in the youth-YDS relationship. Youth who had to switch to a new YDS during the program year complained of the disruption they felt. Second, OPP was encouraged to be careful to manage YDS case loads given the importance of the YDS relationship.

Another challenge relates to the CSS/JJ and DCF youth. OPP should find a way of working with these two populations that will promote their success in pathway progression and in educational advancement, whenever possible.

The third challenge area was in relation to data management. The evaluation team made several recommendations in this area:

- Improve the validity and reliability of outcome data
- Streamline the required data fields to reduce missing data
- Improve the accuracy and consistency of data entry to ensure “length of time” data is available for critical calculations regarding the quantity and duration of effort expended
- Develop more efficient ways of extracting and reporting data to reduce burden on staff