

Background

Villages Without Walls is a non-profit 501 (c) (3) organization founded in 2001. The mission of Villages Without Walls is to improve urban community conditions and confront family challenges by creating constructive economic, educational and social services.

The Drane Family Fund and the Arlington Street Church provided financial support to Villages Without Walls to implement a summer pilot program. Villages Without Walls summer pilot program employed six high-risk youthful offenders to organize and facilitate study circles (*“Study circles are a process for public dialogue and community change”*).

Villages Without Walls worked in partnership with the Department of Youth Services. The Department of Youth Services is the juvenile justice agency in Massachusetts, divided into four regions: Metro, Central, Southeastern, and Western. The Department of Youth Services has daily reporting centers in nearly all neighborhoods called Community Reentry Centers. The Community Reentry Centers provide services to youth who are transitioning from the Department of Youth Services secure treatment facilities and residential placements back to their home in the community. This structured reintegration process provides youth with intensive supervision and support to make a positive transition. The Dorchester Community Reentry Center referred six committed youth (*when a child is “committed” to the Department of Youth Services, it implies that the child is accountable to the Department of Youth Services until they reach 18 years of age or if they are charged as a delinquent, or 21 if they are charged as a youthful offender*) to participate in Villages Without Wall summer pilot program.

Villages Without Walls worked together with the Department of Youth Services to uncover strategies to reduce recidivism among youthful offenders. The research and evaluation Department of Community Justice researched that youth who successfully complete or partially complete a diversion program had much lower recidivism rates than those who did not complete a program. *“Conversely, individuals with fewer ties to society will have more barriers to successful reentry, which makes recidivism more likely.”*

Villages Without Walls, Unlimited Potential Program, using the study circles model for public dialogue and community change, restored youthful offenders to their dignity and self-worth by providing them an opportunity to be reintegrated back to the community they offended as useful citizens.

Results and Impact of the Project

Villages Without Walls and the Department of Youth Services identified six individuals (*4 boys and 2 girls*) who are serious and chronic offenders; with a particular emphasis on gang members and gun offenders. The goal of the pilot program was to provide evidence that *“Desistance has been associated with changes in peer and social relations”*; desistance comes about because of changes in peer networks, social bonds to employment and pro-social relationships that draw individuals away from negative peer networks that encourage deviance.

Study Circles

Study Circles are at the heart of a process for public dialogue and community change. This process begins with community organizing, and is followed by facilitated, small-group dialogue

that leads to a range of outcomes. Study circles don't advocate a particular solution. Instead, they welcome many points of view around a shared concern.

The peer leaders were given an orientation of Villages Without Walls, Unlimited Potential Program and what is a study circle. Their work began around a "Word storm" ("*Word storming is like Brainstorming, except that it deals with ideas and feeling around a particular word or concept, whereas Brainstorming elicits ideas or solutions to a question or problem*". *Moving Beyond Icebreakers*) on the word "**Dorchester**". The peer leaders were asked to "*say the first words that come to your mind; don't censor your ideas*". Words that described their neighborhood included:

Violence	Murders
Hot Spot	Gangs
A place to live	Peace
Feens/Drugs/Crack	Death
Shootings	Prostitution
Different People/Race	Black People
Spanish People	Cape Verde
Schools	Mayor
Governor	Clubs
Cops	Board Jumpers/Immigrants

The words then guided a conversation about what the list of words tell us about the Dorchester community. Words were circled; lines were drawn showing connections between the words and concepts. This process led to the peer leaders spending time talking about the issues or concerns they wanted to address.

Questions that focused the conversation:

- What is the situation or issue we want to address?
- What are we trying to accomplish? How would study circles help?
- Who needs to be involved?
- What would be the best way to reach young people? (In the neighborhood or community? Through schools? Through an organization?)
- Are there others already working on this issue? Could we join forces?

Naming the issue:

The peer leaders identified four priorities:

- Youth and Police Relationships
- Education Reform
- Neighborhoods
- Youth Violence

The peer leaders voted on the four priorities and youth violence in the community was their main concern.

Next Steps:

- Plan and Carry out Communication/Outreach
- Recruit Participants and Form Diverse Groups
- Plan the Kick off
- Hold a Demonstration Study Circle

On August 20th the peer leaders hosted a demonstration study circle with approximately 40-50 participants. There were a wide range of participants: social workers, lawyers, youth workers, clergy, police officers, media, parent who have lost a child to gang violence, youth etc. The demonstration study circle was a huge success. The Center for Social Development surveyed the participants (*see the Center for Social Development report for survey results*). 76% of the participants agreed that the peer leader's involvement with the Department of Youth Services influenced their decision to participate in the study circle. 56% also agreed that the peer leader's involvement with the Department of Youth Services impacted their opinion on their ability to conduct a study circle. And 80% said they would be interested in participating in future study circles.

Village Without Walls accomplished two principal things: 1. Villages Without Walls provided youthful offenders the opportunity to convene the community around a shared concern (*of which they partook*), 2. Villages Without Walls created an environment where community members, police officers, politicians etc. could put into action the philosophy of restorative justice (*reconciliation, restoration, healing and rehabilitation*).

Training Groups (T-Groups)

In 1947, the National Training Laboratories Institute began in Bethel, ME. They pioneered the use of T-groups (*Laboratory Training*) in which the learners use here and now experience in the group, feedback among participants and theory on human behavior to explore group process and gain insights into themselves and others. The goal is to offer youth options for their behavior in groups.

Villages Without Walls implemented T-Groups to provide the peer leaders with an opportunity to learn about themselves, their impact on others and how to function more effectively groups and interpersonal situations. T-Groups facilitated this learning by bringing the peer leaders together for the express purpose of studying their own behavior when they interact within the group.

One way of describing what may happen for the peer leaders is --

1. Unfreezing habitual responses to situations - this is facilitated by the peer leaders own desire to explore new ways of behaving and the facilitators staying non-directive, silent, and providing little structure or task agenda
2. Self generated and chosen change by the peer leaders - *Experiment with new behaviors*
-Practice description not evaluation of
3. Reinforce new behavior by positive feedback, peer leaders own assessment of whether what is happening is closer to what she/he intends, supportive environment, trust development

Sources of Change in Groups

- Self-observation – Peer leaders give more attention to their own intentions, feelings, etc.
- Feedback – Peer leaders receive information on the impact they have on others
- Insight – Peer leaders expand self-knowledge
- Self-disclosure – Peer leaders exposes more of themselves to others
- Universality – Peer leaders experience that others share their difficulties, concerns or hopes
- Group Cohesion – Peer leaders experience trust, acceptance & understanding)
- Hope – Peer leaders see others learn, achieve their goals, improve, and cope more effectively
- Vicarious Learning – Peer leaders pick up skills and attitudes from others
- Catharsis – Peer leaders experience a sense of release or breakthrough

T-Group was difficult for the peer leaders because it caused them to focus on their feelings and the communication of feelings, rather than on the communication of information, opinions, or concepts.

In the beginning of a T-Group the peer leaders are usually focused on what they experience as a need for structure, individual emotional safety, predictability, and something to do in common. These needs are what amounts to the “*tip of the iceberg*” in most groups in their back home situation. By not filling the group's time with answers to these needs, “*the T-Group eventually begins to notice what is under the tip of the iceberg*”. It is what is always there in any group but often unseen and not responsibly engaged. So, participants experience anxiety about authority and power, being included and accepted in the group, and intimacy.

According to the feedback given from the peer leaders T-Groups was the most despised assignment, however, when the Center for Social Development interviewed the peer leaders following the completion of the program T-Groups dominated the discussion. The question was asked what will you remember most about the Villages Without Walls pilot program and the response was T-Groups.

Outcome Measurements

Villages Without Walls' intended initial, intermediate and long-term outcomes can be found in the table below (*colored cells suggest whether the proposed outcomes were met*):

Initial Outcomes	Intermediate Outcomes	Long-Term Outcomes
30-50 Youth apply for the 6 peer leader jobs	Youth think critically/analytically (e.g. personally and concerning community related issues)	6 peer leaders will sponsor and facilitate a community wide study circles with up to 100 + people. (This was initially written with the program stretched over a year)
<p>The initial outcomes of having a large number of youth apply for the six peer leader positions were not met.</p> <p>The Department of Youth Services referred six youth. There was not an interview process.</p>	<p>T-Group provided the peer leaders with the space to consider their thinking and express it verbally within the group.</p>	<p>The six peer leaders organized a demonstration study circle on August 20th with up to 40-50 participants.</p>
Peer leaders identify “What is happening in the community that concerns us” and “What are we trying to accomplish”?	Youth embrace diversity and form new relationships and networks with people who they would not otherwise get to know (e.g. community activist, local merchants, neighbors etc.)	Youth increase their display of positive character actions/traits (e.g. integrity, confidence, trustworthiness, concern for others, diligence)
<p>The peer leaders identified what is happening in the community. Issues identified:</p> <p>Youth police relationships Youth violence Education Reform CORI Reform etc.</p> <p>The peer leaders choose youth violence as a priority for the duration of the pilot program.</p>	<p>Through their preparation and involvement in the pilot program the peer leaders wrote letters, called and interacted with city councilors, city officials, neighbors, police officers, reporters, clergy etc.</p>	<p>It was clear that when the peer leaders were at work they made an effort to display positive actions/traits. Two of the peer leaders who have been identified as gang members said “they only think about changing when they are work”.</p>
Youth learn how to approach community organizing (team development, planning etc.).	Youth build an initial working group, and hold a pilot study circle with 15-20 youth and community stakeholders.	
<p>Using the study circles curriculum the peer leaders were trained how to approach community organizing and group facilitation.</p> <p>The peer leader’s facilitated the demonstration study circle event on August 20th.</p>	<p>Because of the short time the youth did invited participants from the demonstration study circle to work with them in organizing more study circles in the future. There were 5 community stakeholders that expressed interest.</p>	

Villages Without Walls summer pilot program was 50% (*the 50% was based on the number of youth that recidivated*) successful in demonstrating that youthful offenders who return to supportive communities, employment, and pro-social relationships may have greater impetus for cognitive transformation and less deviance.

Lessons Learned

The first lesson learned is that there needed to be an interviewing process so that the peer leaders had a clear understanding of what the program entailed. There was a communication breach between the Department of Youth Services Community Reentry Centers case managers and the youth themselves. Because Villages Without Walls is a multi-component, multi-contextual intervention program participation must be voluntary. Change cannot be enforced on a person.

The second lesson learned is: the most successful programs that produce long-term sustained effects, involve long-term, intense interventions. *“The time required to overcome the negative influences of disadvantaged neighborhoods, dysfunctional families, poor school performance and delinquent gangs or peer groups, is measured in years not days or hours” (Delbert S. Elliott, Prevention Programs That Work For Youth: Violence Prevention).*

Research also suggests that *“Short-term or summer work programs are not effective violence or crime prevention programs”*. Thirdly, Villages Without Walls learned that the notion that we can address these long-established influences within eight week is naïve. There is a need for continued research.

Sustainability Plans

“The most significant criterion used in reviewing a program’s effectiveness is evidence of its deterrent effect when using a strong research design” (Blueprints for Violence Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, office of Justice Program and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention). Villages Without Walls is seeking additional funding to research the effectiveness of the Unlimited Potential program using an experimental design.

Villages Without Walls has a seasoned team of experts who are committed to making Villages Without Walls a model intervention program in reducing adolescent violent crime and recidivism among youthful offenders.

Villages Without Walls wants to thank the Drane Family Fund and the Arlington Street Church for their support; without it Villages Without Walls could not have accomplished what it did this summer.

**Villages Without Walls
Profit & Loss
July 2007 through August 2007**

INCOME

The Drane Family Fund	\$ 23,000
The Arlington Street Church	\$ 1,920

TOTAL INCOME **\$ 24,920**

EXPENSES

Staff

6 Peer Leaders	\$ 7,680
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Social Security/Medicare **\$ 841.10**

Consultants

2 Program Facilitators	\$ 4,000
UMASS Evaluation	\$ 3,718
Accountant	\$ 500

Program Events **\$ 748.73**

Program Supplies **\$ 617.83**

Site Leasing

Use and Occupancy	\$ 2,000
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TOTAL EXPENSES **\$20,105.66**