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Addressing Young Adults' Legal Barriers to Opportunities: An Evaluation of Youth Represent's Community Lawyering Model

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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NYC Center for Economic Opportunity

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Foreword

The Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) is committed to evaluating the programs it funds and has contracted with Westat and Metis Associates in order to inform decision-making within CEO and the city agencies with whom they partner. Westat and Metis have developed a collaborative team approach in the planning, design, and implementation of various types of evaluations, including impact, outcome, and implementation studies. In some cases, staff from both Westat and Metis share responsibilities in implementing the study. In other cases, staff from either Westat or Metis is responsible for conducting the study. This study, addressing young adults' legal barriers to opportunity: an evaluation of Youth Represent's community lawyering model, was conducted by staff from Metis Associates.

Joy Zacharia and Artis Bergman are the co-authors of this report. Additional contributions were made by Sarah Griffin and Donna Tapper.

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We also appreciate the contribution of the staff of CEO, especially David Berman, who facilitated the relationship with Youth Represent, and Parker Krasney; both served as invaluable resources.

Introduction

In March 2014, the NYC Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) selected the Westat/Metis evaluation team to assess whether the legal services provided by Youth Represent increase young adults' access to and outcomes for employment, education, housing and other cornerstones of stability, and if these services add value to the community partners' programs.

Youth Represent is a holistic youth defense and advocacy non-profit organization. The organization's mission is to ensure that young people affected by the criminal justice system are afforded every opportunity to reclaim lives of dignity, self-fulfillment, and engagement in their communities. Youth Represent provides services in two major areas: reentry and criminal representation. These services are provided to youth age 24 and under who are involved in the criminal justice system or who are experiencing legal problems because of past involvement in the criminal justice system. Youth Represent uses the knowledge from its direct representation to seek policy reform to reduce the number of youth affected by the criminal justice system and lessen the harm from that involvement.

Youth Represent has provided legal services since 2006 to young adults primarily through partnerships with select non-profits throughout New York City. Utilizing a community-lawyering approach, Youth Represent attorneys and staff, trained in youth engagement approaches, provide a breadth of services that include direct legal representation and advisement on issues that arise when the young adults pursue housing, education, and employment. Through this holistic model (for which the organization won an Innovative Nonprofit Award from CEO in 2013), Youth Represent staff currently provide legal representation and informational workshops for young adults, one-on-one reviews of young adults' Record of Arrest and Prosecution (RAP) sheets, and staff trainings for 16 community partner organizations. Youth Represent also provides legal representation for young adults through their community partnership.

In addition to working with young adults through the partner organizations, clients are referred from other organizations on an individual basis, as legal needs arise. Youth Represent also provides services to individuals who learn about the organization on their own.

The evaluation was conducted by Metis from March through August 2014 and was comprised of field data collection and an analysis of administrative data. Based on the scope of work identified by CEO and Youth Represent, the evaluation was designed to answer the following overarching questions:

- To what extent do the services provided through Youth Represent increase participating young adults' access to and outcomes for employment, education, housing and other cornerstones of stability?
- What can be learned about the types of community organizations that make good partners and about the cost of Youth Represent services?
- To what extent do the services provided through Youth Represent add value to the organization's community partners?

From April through June 2014, data were collected through a variety of methods. Data sources and methods included: young adults and staff at a sample of five partner organizations (survey, interviews, focus groups); staff at all partner organizations (survey); and administrative data provided by Youth Represent (covering the period from July 1, 2013 through June 30, 2014). These data were analyzed and summarized to address the research questions.

Key Findings

Improving Knowledge of Legal Barriers and Legal Rights

Informational Workshops

- **Workshop participants reported increased knowledge about the criminal justice system, their legal barriers, and their rights.** Young adults left the informational workshops with a better understanding of their rights concerning employment, what to divulge when applying for a job, legal rights when confronted by police and how to avoid escalation during these interactions. Overall, 93 percent of respondents indicated that they know more about the barriers faced by someone with a criminal history because of the informational workshop they completed; 97 percent indicated that they know more about their own rights in the criminal justice system for the same reason.
- **Informational workshops were conducted in a manner that put the young adults at ease, facilitated the teaching of critical information about their legal rights, and developed their trust in Youth Represent as an organization.** This is particularly important because the trainings were usually the first opportunity that young adults had to meet and interact with the staff and attorneys from Youth Represent. Almost all young adults (98%) indicated that they will use the information in their own lives.
- **During workshops, Youth Represent also imparted important information about how young adults should interact with the police in a way that reduces the likelihood of escalation, while also providing young adults with a background on their legal rights when confronted by police.** Young adults consistently described learning realistic information that would allow them to avoid harassment and confrontational situations. Across partner organizations, interviewed young adults emphasized that they were taught to interact with the police in a calm manner and not to respond in ways that could be misinterpreted.

One-on-One RAP Sheet Reviews

- **One-on-one RAP sheet reviews with young adults were an essential component of the reentry services provided by Youth Represent to partner organizations.** For participating young adults, the experience increased their knowledge about their own criminal histories, prepared them to respond to questions about their criminal history from potential employers, helped identify and correct RAP sheet errors, and increased their confidence in navigating this

element of the job application process. Youth Represent attorneys use RAP sheets as a diagnostic tool for identifying further reentry barriers and as a necessary investigative tool in other areas of representation.

Staff Trainings and Advice Provided

- **Partner staff had a better understanding of their participants' legal barriers because of the training sessions, and guidance and advice, offered by Youth Represent.** Partner staff left the Youth Represent training with a much better idea of how their organization and Youth Represent can assist young adults. After the training, 63 percent of staff members indicated that their knowledge increased to a large extent with regard to how they can assist young adults with their legal barriers. An even larger proportion of staff (80%) reported that their understanding of how Youth Represent can assist their participants increased to a large extent as a result of their participation in the training. And, almost all partner staff (98%) reported that they know how and for what reasons to contact Youth Represent for support.

Legal Services Provided to Young Adults

Characteristics of Clients and Services Provided

- **In 2013–14, Youth Represent attorneys and staff worked on a total of 1,233 reentry and criminal legal services on behalf of 738 young adults.**¹ More than half of these young adults (58%) had more than one active case with Youth Represent. The majority of these individuals are male, Black or Black-Latino, and over the age of 18. Of all legal services provided, 85% were reentry and 15% were criminal.
- **Youth Represent performed reentry services concerning young adults' criminal records 962 times in 2013-14.**² The majority of these services (71%) entailed obtaining and reviewing young adults' RAP sheets. These reviews not only allowed clients to better understand their legal rights and potential employment barriers, they also served as a means for the Youth Represent attorneys to recognize other legal issues and were essential in informing their representation in other legal areas. Additional reentry services concerning young adults' criminal records included correcting errors on the RAP sheets (26% of services concerning records) and assisting clients with Certificates of Relief or early termination of probation (3% of services concerning records).
- **Apart from the records-related services, Youth Represent attorneys and staff worked on 271 unique legal services cases. Most frequently, these involved criminal cases (70%).** The next most prevalent area was reentry legal services (30%), which included employment (10%), family court (8%), education (5%), other topics (5%), and housing (2%).

¹ These numbers exclude clients to whom Youth Represent gave legal advice.

² These 962 instances constitute 78% of the aforementioned 1,233 services undertaken in 2013–14.

Characteristics of Connecting Organizations

- **The large majority of young adults provided with legal representation (89%) were connected to Youth Represent by a partner organization.** Approximately half (21) of the 40 connecting organizations were partner organizations and half (19) were non-partner organizations. Among the young adults who came to Youth Represent through a partner organization, 38 percent came from an organization that serves court-mandated young adults, 18 percent came from an organization partner that serves young adults with other criminal justice system involvement, and 34 percent were served by an organization without any criminal justice requirements for its participants.

Length of Active Legal Engagements

- **Youth Represent clients remained actively engaged in working with the organization's attorneys to address a single legal issue for an average of 47 days.** But, the length of time it takes to close a legal case was associated with the area of legal service; cases involving family court lasted approximately 110 days while cases involving criminal or educational issues lasted about 30 and 23 days, respectively. Only 11 percent of all cases ended because of attrition.

Legal Outcomes

- **Results for clients are overwhelmingly positive: 4 out of 5 legal cases were successfully resolved by Youth Represent.**³ These favorable findings were echoed by the unanimous positive feedback of young adults and partner staff who confirmed that Youth Represent attorneys have provided effective legal services in response to a breadth of situations, from immediate crises (e.g., arrest or ticketing) to complicated scenarios requiring extended involvement (e.g., identity theft, employer discrimination). **However, the extent to which a successful case outcome was achieved depends on the legal area.** Rates of success differed substantially among legal service areas. Youth Represent lawyers and staff were most successful when working to resolve cases involving education, such as the reinstatement of inappropriately suspended students (93% success rate) and the correction of a criminal records (87% success rate), and least successful with cases that involved family court (40% success rate).
- **Youth Represent staff and attorneys are efficient and responsive.** Another dimension of Youth Represent's effective resolution of legal cases is the relative speed in which cases were completed. And, for many of these young adults, representation from an attorney would not have occurred had it not been for Youth Represent.

³ Case outcomes were provided by Youth Represent. A "successful outcome" is defined as one that achieved a result that was better than the penalty/status quo the client was facing. An "unsuccessful outcome" is defined as one that either failed to achieve any results (e.g., a criminal record was not able to be corrected) or failed to achieve a result that was better than the status quo. In no instances, according to Youth Represent, are clients left worse off than they would be had they not received assistance. Finally, a "neutral outcome" is defined as one that includes a combination of "status quo" sustaining and positive elements. Client records for this analysis covered closed cases between July 1, 2013 and June 30, 2014.

Relationship with Young Adults

Quality of Interactions between Youth Represent and Young Adults

- **Youth Represent attorneys are reliable and trustworthy partners for young adults** and inspire trust in their clients even though some are initially wary of attorneys. In fact, the perception of Youth Represent attorneys as “relatable” is by and large the most important contributing factor in the inspiration of trust between clients and Youth Represent attorneys. Young adults interviewed were quick to describe the staff as individuals who were authentic, who could be trusted, and who understand their needs and the needs of the communities in which they live.

Young Adults’ Expectations of Future Engagements with Youth Represent

- **Young adults served by partner organizations universally expressed a willingness to approach Youth Represent for help and guidance in the future.** They further indicated that they would approach Youth Represent under almost any circumstance where legal assistance was needed, but especially emphasized situations where they may need the immediate support of a lawyer (e.g., if stopped by the police or arrested).
- **Partner organization staff unanimously applauded Youth Represent’s dedication to serving the legal needs of their participants, including providing individualized legal services to those young adults who approach Youth Represent’s attorneys directly as well as through the recommendation of a staff member from a partner organization.** Partner staff indicated that Youth Represent staff seem dedicated to working one-on-one with young adults for as long as it takes for a legal case to be solved. For example, 86 percent of partner organizations *strongly agree* that the staff of Youth Represent provide a valuable service to young adults.

Relationship with Partner Organizations

Perceived Characteristics of a Good Community Partner

- **Youth Represent has served young adults with varied legal needs and is therefore equipped to partner with a wide variety of community organizations and city agencies.** Youth Represent is also equipped to partner with organizations that serve both younger and older youth.
- **Partnerships benefit from organizational buy-in as well as a capacity to facilitate the provision of Youth Represent’s services.** According to Youth Represent staff, the most important criterion in a partner is buy-in from the organization’s administration and staff through an “acknowledgment that their population has substantial legal issues and can benefit from” Youth Represent’s services.

Average Costs per Client and Time Spent Providing Services to Community Partners

- **In a review of fiscal and client-level data, Youth Represent senior leadership estimated that the average annual cost of providing legal services for a client is \$707.53.**⁴ This estimate was derived by dividing Youth Represent’s annual organizational budget by the number of clients served for the past four years and averaging the result.⁵ By grounding this estimate in four years of financial and program data, Youth Represent is accounting for the significant organizational growth that has occurred in recent years (with their organizational budget and clients served doubling between 2011 and 2014).
- **During an average week, 77 percent of staff time was spent working to resolve clients’ legal cases. Close to half of the time (45%) was spent working in the office,** another 16 percent of time during an average week was spent on-site at community partner organizations. Time spent in transit accounted for 11 percent and 5 percent of the time was spent representing clients in court or at legal hearings. Finally, 23 percent of the time was spent on other tasks, including administrative tasks (13%) and entering information into a client database (10%).

Value to Community Partners

- **Community partners described the services provided by Youth Represent as valuable to their organization and supportive of their efforts to serve youth.** Across organizations, the partners praised Youth Represent staff for the information and support provided to both the organizations and the youth they serve. The majority of partner staff who completed a survey described their organization’s partnership with Youth Represent as *extremely valuable* (80%) and indicated that Youth Represent supported their organization’s efforts in serving youth *to a large extent* (83%).

Recommendations

- **Institutionalize the high-quality interpersonal relationships that exist between Youth Represent attorneys and the young adults and partner organizations they serve by documenting the approaches taken and embedding the strategies into the program model.** This will be particularly critical if Youth Represent chooses to expand programming by increasing staff, but is also a necessary step to prepare for any staff transitions that may occur. Findings indicate that the effectiveness of Youth Represent is derived to a large extent from the excellent interpersonal competencies of its staff. The attorneys providing services to partner organizations were lauded as authentic, approachable, and trustworthy. Their ability to put young adults at ease and immediately convey reliability was described as critical to the success of the

⁴ Here, a “client” is defined as someone with whom Youth Represent met individually and through that meeting, have identified a legal need that could be addressed through Youth Represent’s services. Participation in a workshop does not automatically make someone a client.

⁵ For 2014, Youth Represent projected the number of clients served based on their mid-year numbers. Excluding 2014 from the estimation would result in a cost estimate within \$10 of the total average cost.

services provided. These findings were extremely positive, but they also raise a potential risk for the organization, insofar as the success of the program model depends on the specific personnel selected to work with partner staff and young adults.

- **Continue to explore what constitutes an effective community partnership, with particular attention paid to identifying which particular elements of a partnership (e.g., scheduling, alignment of values) are most closely associated with positive program outcomes.**

Through a process of internal reflection, Youth Represent should develop additional indicators of partnership quality that are sensitive enough to allow for further analysis. Additional indicators of partnership quality could include factors such as time and resources needed to collaborate with each organization. Subsequent analyses of effective community partnership should include a broader set of program outcomes, including non-legal outcomes such as impacts of trainings on participant behavior and achievement of personal goals (e.g., employment, education).

- **Continue to explore strategies for increasing the effectiveness of the staff trainings.**

Consider focusing on ways of improving the topical information about the New York State Court System and to legal issues pertaining to parents and families. Based on the feedback of participating staff, additional recommendations include extending the length of the trainings, expanding the topics covered and using more specific examples, visual materials, and interactive elements. To strengthen the information provided on the court system, Youth Represent should consider separate trainings that include visits to court and/or opportunities to interact with court officers. Finally, consider further tailoring sessions to the particular needs of each partner organization (e.g., emphasizing certain topics that relate to that organization's programmatic focus or participants).

- **Continue to explore how the impact of Youth Represent's services on the alleviation of barriers to young adults' access to opportunities can be assessed.** The identification of a comparison population would allow for a more rigorous evaluation of program impact.

- **To facilitate future evaluation, Youth Represent should work with partner organizations to collect more comprehensive data on participant outcomes tied to trainings (both staff and young adult) and legal services.** To the extent possible, Youth Represent should include annual receipt of information on observable impacts in their partnership agreements.