



**“Someone Who’s Been There But Isn’t Too Far Away”:
Findings from a Study of the Mentoring Component of a Young Adult Reentry Program**

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INTRODUCTION

Little is known about the effects of mentoring with adults who are reintegrating back to the community following incarceration. This exploratory research in the Self-Development: Reentry Program, a voluntary program for young adults reentering from a local correctional facility, investigates the meanings that program participants and mentors attach to their mentoring relationships, and highlights the need for solid infrastructure and training in mentoring programs.

The topic of mentoring and reentry is timely. On April 9, 2008, President Bush signed the Second Chance Act of 2007 which passed both houses of Congress with bipartisan support. Some of the \$362 million that would be authorized by the bill to expand reentry services for the nearly 700,000 people released from incarceration each year is allocated to mentoring programs. Mentoring is intended to improve outcomes, such as those reported by Farley and McClanahan (2007), for people returning from incarceration. Participants with mentors in the Ready4Work program had higher retention rates in the program and were more likely to find and keep jobs than those who did not participate in mentoring. Estimates from Matthews (2003) and Tierney, Grossman, and Resch (2000) suggest that programs should expect to spend a minimum of \$1000 per mentoring match in order for the match to be successful, especially in a reintegration setting.

Program Description

The Syracuse-based Self-Development: Reentry Program is a program of the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA), funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). It focuses on assisting young adults between the ages of 16 and 24, who have some indication of substance abuse and are returning to the community from incarceration. Participants are mainly identified through CCA’s work in the Onondaga County Correctional Facility (known locally as “Jamesville”). For those who are already released from local or state prisons, referrals can be made by New York State Division of Parole (NYS DOP) and Onondaga County Probation Department (OCPD) officers, from community agencies, or through self-referral. Individuals not currently incarcerated must be enrolled within 60 days of

release from custody. Upon release, participants are eligible to receive various services including substance abuse treatment readiness and treatment-related services, case management, employment services, and mentoring.

Description of Mentoring Component

Mentoring is intended to provide support for the participants' community reintegration, progress in addressing substance abuse issues, establishment of positive relationships, and development of connections to resources in the community. All of the Reentry program's current mentors were recruited from CCA's Recovery Network of New York (RNNY), a program that is also funded by SAMHSA. The Recovery Network is a voluntary program that delivers services to adults who have histories of addiction and involvement in the criminal justice system. It provides services in the domains of employment, citizenship restoration, reintegration, and general support services with an emphasis on peer-led and peer-driven recovery support. It includes a drop-in center which serves as a "safe haven" and holds peer-led support group meetings twice daily. To become a mentor, Recovery Network members must have been abstinent for at least one year.

Reentry participants who enroll in the program while they are incarcerated at the Jamesville facility are matched with a mentor four to six weeks prior to their release. The mentor and program participant meet in the correctional facility at least twice during that period. The Department of Correction has been supportive of the program in general and mentoring in particular. The facility agreed to not count the weekly mentor-mentee meetings against the incarcerated person's allowed number of personal visits, thus avoiding the need for the person to make a choice between a family visit and a mentor visit and encouraging program participants to meet with their mentors. Additionally, CCA provides transportation to mentors who would otherwise be unable to get to the correctional facility, which is in an outlying community eight miles from the CCA office in downtown Syracuse. After a participant is released, his mentor is expected to remain in regular weekly contact with him. A stipend is provided to the mentor to cover expenses incurred through transporting or entertaining his mentee.

Typically, the program expects participants to remain enrolled in the program for about one year. A mentor may remain with the participant with whom he was matched during the participant's incarceration for the duration of the participant's involvement in the program. However, if the match does not seem to be working out, a new mentor may be assigned to the participant. Also, some participants may not remain involved with the program for the expected one-year time period. In those cases, mentors will be reassigned to a participant who is active in the program. At any given time, a mentor may have one to three mentees in various stages of the program. Once a mentee is discharged from the program, he and his mentor may decide, and are encouraged, to continue the relationship they have developed, although formal program support is ended.

During the first two years of the Reentry program, the Recovery Network trained and supervised prospective mentors. At the start of the third year of the program, CCA added a new element in the form of a "senior mentor" to be available 17 hours per week in order to provide any participant with ready access to a mentor. In addition, the senior mentor coordinates other aspects of mentoring, including training and support of new mentors, monitoring of participant involvement with mentors, facilitating communication between program staff and mentors, and troubleshooting mentor or mentee issues that arise. The senior mentor, a CCA employee, was himself incarcerated in a New York State prison. In this, the fourth year of the program, the

senior mentor has taken a new position within the agency, and his responsibilities have been assumed by the program's new coordinator.

APPROACH

The research was conducted in the winter and spring of 2007. We observed mentor trainings and meetings, created and administered a satisfaction survey to program participants and mentors, and conducted interviews with program participants and mentors. The study participants were all young male program participants and adult male mentors, as males were the preponderance of the program's population.

Survey

We administered survey questionnaires to 11 of the 13 men who were active mentors of Reentry program participants during the data collection period. Each mentor completed a general questionnaire about his background, motivations for becoming a mentor, and interactions with program staff. Mentors also completed a shorter questionnaire designed to gather information about particular mentor/mentee matches, rather than the mentors' overall mentoring experiences. That questionnaire focused specifically on their relationships with individual mentees and included questions related to the frequency and nature of their contact with their mentees, characteristics and values that they might share with their mentee, and their assessment of the success of the relationship. The program compensated mentors with a \$20 gift certificate.

We also administered questionnaires to 14 program participants. That instrument focused on the respondent's relationship with his mentor and included questions similar to those asked on the shorter questionnaire administered to mentors. Those participants who were part of active mentor/mentee matches were specifically targeted to participate, but the instrument was also administered to any participant who "dropped in" at the CCA office. Program participants were compensated with a \$10 gift certificate.

Interviews

We conducted in-depth interviews with three mentors and three mentees. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. One mentor and one mentee constituted a "matched pair." Interviews were designed to increase the program's understanding of satisfaction and frustration associated with mentoring relationships, mentors' and mentees' perceptions of the matching and closing processes, opinions on staff support, experience with past mentoring relationships, and mentors' and mentees' suggestions for improvement. Each interviewee was compensated with a \$20 gift certificate.

FINDINGS

The average age of the 11 mentors who participated in the study was 48 years old. As members of CCA's Recovery Network, all reported histories of either criminal justice system involvement (all except one have been incarcerated) or substance abuse (all but two). The 14 program participants who participated in the study ranged in age from 17 to 23 years old. Twelve had enrolled in the program while they were incarcerated at Jamesville, and two had enrolled after their release from other correctional facilities. All of the study participants were male. Although a small sample of mentors and program participants was used, the sample had

participated in 68 mentor/mentee matches during the two-and-a-half year life of the program. Thus, these findings represent the range of experiences accumulated during various individual matches.

Mentor Recruitment, Matching and Connections

- Mentors consistently cited “giving back” as a major motivation for their volunteering to become mentors. This is particularly significant for mentors who have a “previous life” similar to that of their mentees.
- Mentees desire a mentor who has been where the participants have been in terms of criminal justice system involvement and substance use. But they want “someone who’s been there but isn’t too far away” and has not forgotten what that lifestyle was like.
- In general, mentors and mentees agreed that mentors should be patient, understanding, caring, nonjudgmental, and reliable.
 - Mentors suggested that prospective mentors should demonstrate that they have been a mentor in a “natural setting” sometime during their lives. They advised that prior experience with mentoring would be desirable.
 - Mentees suggested that mentors should be outgoing and funny especially during the initial stage of the relationship as that helps mentees feel more comfortable and able to open up.

Training and Program Support

- Both mentors and mentees suggested that trainings for mentors should include some practical tips for starting conversations and interacting with mentees who might be skeptical at first about having a mentor.
- Mentees might benefit from some readiness training prior to being matched with a mentor. Many program participants have not had reliable trusting relationships in their natural lives and may need some help in preparing for a mentoring relationship.
- Because mentoring is a term that many people associate with youth, using a different term might be better-received by mentees who are trying to establish themselves as young adults.
- Both mentors and mentees advocated for transparency in the processes of assigning and closing matches. They would like to have input into and information about decisions regarding matching and ending relationships.
- Mentors felt better equipped to fulfill their roles when they were presented with clear definitions of those roles, realistic goals to accomplish with their mentees, and adequate information about general program functions.
- The support groups for mentors that had recently begun when this study was conducted were received very favorably by mentors as times for fellowship and sharing of information.
- Most mentors are just “a few steps ahead” of their mentees in terms of their own reintegration. For those mentors especially, financial support is particularly important. Providing reliable transportation and/or financial compensation for money spent on transportation or activities with mentees encourages even those mentors with limited means to volunteer and to remain with the program.
- Both mentors and mentees suggested having program-sponsored activities in which mentors and mentees could participate together. Not only does this remove the financial

burden of entertaining mentees from the mentors, but it provides a way for mentor-mentee pairs to interact with other pairs in a group setting.

Meanings that Mentors and Mentees Attach to the Mentoring Relationship

- Mentors received satisfaction from helping to prepare their mentees for the future, which includes setting goals and priorities, as well as assuming responsibility.
- For mentors, engaging in these relationships is not simply a volunteer experience but an emotional investment. This was made evident during interviews in which they expressed great disappointment regarding matches that did not work out, as well as great enthusiasm when they felt they had made a genuine connection with a mentee.
- Both mentors and mentees regard the establishment of trust as an important foundational piece of their mentoring relationships. They recognized that mentees may be skeptical at the beginning of the relationship. Mentors expressed satisfaction with being able to earn a mentee's trust, and mentees expressed satisfaction with having a trustworthy mentor.
- Mentoring relationships may be particularly meaningful if they begin while the mentee is still incarcerated, as they do in this program. Meeting in the correctional facility allows the mentor to demonstrate that he is reliable and trustworthy if he consistently shows up to visit his mentee. It also gives the mentee immediate access following his release to someone with whom he is already familiar.
- Mentees received satisfaction from knowing there is someone "in my phone" with whom they can talk about problems and receive moral support.
- Both mentors and mentees consistently brought up the theme of respect and its importance in their relationships. The relationship is mutually satisfying when there is mutual respect between the mentee and mentor.

DISCUSSION

Although this is exploratory research and was conducted with a small sample of mentors and mentees, some themes clearly emerged. This young adult population is challenging to work with, but the findings suggest that if mentors are realistically prepared for what to expect from program participants, disappointments can be buffered. Poor relationships with individual mentees do not necessarily translate into dissatisfaction with the overall mentoring experience if this preparation is effective.

Our findings suggest that, with the proper programmatic support, both mentors and program participants can receive benefits from their mentoring relationships that may facilitate reintegration. Mentors are given the opportunity to "give back" and improve their civic engagement, an important component of successful reintegration, and mentees have someone to guide them through the process of reintegration. Their mentor is "someone who's been there but isn't too far away" and understands the challenges they face during reintegration, and someone who, unlike a case manager, is uniquely invested in a personal relationship with them. Finally, both mentors and mentees learn to establish trusting relationships and feel respected. This is important to reintegration as many people with histories of criminal justice system involvement or substance abuse are challenged by the stigmas associated with those identities.

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