

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Point of Proof:

OVERTOWN YOUTH CENTER

MIAMI, FLORIDA

WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF”?

The Overtown Youth Center (OYC) is a place where Black children and families have been succeeding for over a decade. OYC has become a “go-to” model for youth and family development because of its ability to help vulnerable youth make a positive transition into adulthood. Throughout its history, OYC has graduated 100 percent of its high school senior class with 95 percent of its alumni making a successful transition to college, vocational school, the military, and/or the workforce.

The mission of the Overtown Youth Center is to inspire and empower youth and families by fostering hope through enrichment services. OYC accomplishes this mission by offering year-round academic and enrichment programming that takes a holistic and comprehensive approach to address the diverse needs of its target population by implementing a national youth development model from Self Enhancement, Inc. (SEI).

The program model includes: 24-hour case management; in-school, after school, and summer services; tutoring, homework assistance and other academic support; counseling; behavior management; and college preparation, particularly in the areas of reading and mathematics. OYC also offers programs and services that focus on character development, team building skills, life skills, physical fitness, nutrition and health and wellness. This includes culinary classes, fine arts training (i.e., dance, music, spoken word, visual arts, creative writing, etc.), transportation and exposure to various careers and experiences. Finally, OYC provides opportunities for increased parent and guardian involvement in support of their children’s educational and social development through its parent involvement programming. OYC is also the only organization in Miami that implements this youth development program model.

The Center’s goals are to 1) be an integral part of the community; 2) promote lifelong learning and success for inner-city youth and citizens; and 3) help build resilient children who become contributing and engaged members of society.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?

OYC programming targets Overtown youth and families who qualify for Title 1 Services, ages 8-25, who show low academic performance, experience a lack of safety in the community and have limited access to productive activities during out-of-school hours. The Center currently serves more than 400 youth and families composed of the following demographics: 74 percent African American, 15 percent Hispanic, and 11 percent Haitian. Fifty-six percent of these youth are male and 44 percent are female. Within this target population, approximately 95 percent qualify for Title I services based on U. S. Census poverty estimates.

The most recent U.S. Census data further illuminates the need to support youth in this community. The estimated Overtown crime index is 55 percent higher than Miami’s overall average, and the Miami crime index is 82 percent higher than the Florida average. The estimated violent crime rate is also 55 percent higher than Miami’s overall average. An astonishing 49 percent failed to obtain a high school (HS) diploma. This is alarming considering that 80 percent of the nation has obtained a HS diploma. With a median income of approximately \$15,000 to \$20,000 annually and 36 percent reporting less than \$10,000 in annual income, more than 41 percent of families with children and 46 percent of individuals live below the poverty level compared to 9 percent and 12 percent respectively, nationally. Fifty-five percent of residents age 17 and older were unemployed, and an OYC parent survey revealed similar results with only 43 percent of reporting parents employed. The remaining 57 percent were unemployed.

Of the estimated 5,135 households in Overtown, 2,392 are families. Three percent (129) of families are headed by a grandparent raising grandchildren. Primarily a rental community, Overtown has an astounding 62.3 percent rate of households that report spending more than 30 percent of their income on monthly rent. A clearer picture of economic hardship for children and families emerges when this finding is coupled with the fact that only 54 percent of eligible workers age 16 and up are in the labor force, with an unemployment rate of 14.8 percent (nearly double the City of Miami’s at 9.6 percent).

HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?

OYC defines success as the moment when its vision for a community full of positive contributing citizens (PCCs) is manifested. OYC defines PCCs as students who have entered into a post-secondary educational institution, vocational school, the military and/or obtained gainful employment and are





making a worthwhile impact in their local community. To accomplish this, OYC's short-term goals include:

- 90% of OYC seniors will graduate from high school;
- 85% of OYC students will have on-time promotion in school;
- 85% of OYC's youth will maintain or increase satisfactory grades, behavior and/or attendance; and
- 85% of OYC alumni will be on target to become Positive Contributing Citizens (PCCs).

OYC's long-term goal is to have at least 90 percent of its alumni return to the Overtown community and take over the work of mitigating poverty and its associated outcomes to transform the community back into one "void of lack," because it is filled with resources and productive citizens. Also, OYC ultimately hopes to replicate the work it is doing in Overtown to inner-city communities around the nation.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

The success of OYC's programming is measured through an array of internal and external data sources. Internally, OYC has students work with their coordinators to complete an annual "Barriers to Success" checklist, which measures obstacles involving school, family, individuals, or peer issues that may interfere with a student's achievement. Coordinators and students also work together to create an Individual Success Plan (ISP) outlining students' academic, personal, and social goals, as well as the strategies they will use to reach them. The plan is discussed, revised and measured at least once quarterly by the coordinator and the student based upon data that is collected from observation and case notes. Students are monitored daily, and case notes are entered twice monthly to tie students' progress back to the ISP.

In addition to its internal measures, OYC also tracks success by examining whether students have good attendance, favorable progress reports and maintained or improved grades. This is done through curriculum-based assessments, standardized test scores, teacher assessments, parent testimonials, behavioral monitoring, school referral records, pre-, mid-, and post-iSteep test scores (a research-based model for improving achievement for all students), and surveys. Diminished referrals for inappropriate behavior (according to school referral records) and direct observation by OYC's in- and out- of-school programming staff are also taken into account. Progress reports and report cards are distributed at least once quarterly. In addition, some of OYC's funders complete program monitoring to gauge the effectiveness of OYC's programming. While OYC consistently receives positive scores on these



REGINALD L. ABEL

reports, the biggest measure of OYC's success is the progress being made by the young adults who are doing well in school and in life as a result of OYC's programming.

OVERTOWN YOUTH CENTER SUCCESS STORY

One such young adult who has come through the Overtown Youth Center's (OYC) program and grown up to become a successful Positive Contributing Citizen (PCC) is 24-year-old **Reginald L. Abel**. Reginald began attending OYC's program when he was in the fifth grade. As the oldest of three children being raised by a single mother, Reginald admits that life was not always easy, and his family sometimes faced challenges. However, he credits OYC with being a "safe haven" for him and his family, exposing him to many opportunities. The center provided him with the support he needed to do well in school, become a first generation college graduate and make a successful transition to young adulthood.

"When I was younger, OYC helped expose me to so many things [and not just] seeing what was in my community. Whether it was going to the president's inauguration or taking a trip to New York for professional development, I was exposed to a lot of things my peers weren't, and I was able [to realize] what and where I wanted to be," Reginald shared. He also credits OYC with helping him to figure out which college he should attend by taking him on college tours and prepping him for the college experience. *"I applied to lots of schools, but I didn't know where I wanted to go. Then I went to Florida State for [the] first time. [OYC] really guided me and made my transition to college a lot smoother."*

According to Reginald, OYC went above and beyond their commitment to him and his family by providing him with immense support so he could concentrate solely on his classes while in college. *"OYC really gave me security while I was in school. My parents didn't know much about college, but I still had a great amount of support from my OYC family. There were people I could turn to if I needed help; that was one thing that set OYC apart. They made sure my family had food while I was away and gave me the financial and academic assistance necessary to lead me in the right direction and make sure I was on [a] good path to success. Growing up in single parent homes, we worry about our families [when we leave them]; but I never had to worry about my family because OYC took care of them. They took care of everything and let me go and experience things without the worry,"* Reginald shared.

Reginald also credits OYC with inspiring in him a love for travel. Thus far, he has been to the Bahamas, Costa Rica, Mexico, and the United Arab Emirates and is planning a trip to Thailand. *"Doing a lot with OYC in my younger years made me want to see more. It challenged me to broaden my horizons and have the courage to go out of the country*



The single most important thing people should know about OYC is that its effectiveness could not have been achieved without the implementation of wraparound services for children and families by people who not only understand the needs of Black children and their families, but make it their daily mission to use their gifts, talents, and passion to support them.

to see places that a lot of my friends and family members can't see. Then I come back to motivate them to do the same thing," he said.

Reginald graduated from Florida State University in December 2014 with a dual Bachelor's of Science in Finance and Marketing. He is now a member of Teach For America and began teaching seventh grade math to students in Houston, Texas in August of 2016. Reginald will also begin a Master's program in January of 2017 at Florida State University, where he will continue his study of marketing. He ultimately desires to work for a marketing firm doing Integrated Marketing Communications.

Reginald said he doesn't think he would be where he is in life had it not been for OYC. "I'm appreciative of OYC and I'm definitely helping them out in any way I can. I would love to come back and speak to youth currently in the program so they can see someone who looks like them and [who] has been where they are [and] show them they can do anything," he concluded.

Reginald Abel is a shining example of OYC's success and the embodiment of what it encourages all of its youth to aspire to.

WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

OYC is successful because it implements a comprehensive, holistic approach to youth development. To effectively and efficiently deliver high-quality services



to its target population, OYC develops partnerships with parents, schools, and community organizations. OYC understands that it takes a village to (effectively) raise a child. Therefore, it does not operate in silos and is very strategic when choosing who to hire to impact the lives of the youth and families it serves. As a result, the agency is run by qualified and compassionate staff who work tirelessly to ensure youth and families have the resources they need to succeed in school and in life. Having a program that operates year-round (in school, after school, and during the summer) gives OYC an advantage that other agencies do not have. Youth and families are able to build important, consistent relationships with mentors they love and trust who fill in the gaps for many who lack good support systems. OYC also consistently searches for innovative curriculums and approaches to implement its educational and enrichment components to ensure youth are not only engaged, but retaining what they learn. All of these methods of implementation help OYC achieve its goals.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

OYC, like many community-based nonprofits, has faced several challenges throughout its history. One of the major challenges is that the need in the community is greater than the resources available to address it. Therefore, OYC is constantly working to ensure it can continue to deliver quality programming and serve more youth and families without depleting its resources. OYC has grown tremendously over the last few years, and sometimes it is a challenge to keep up with the growth as it relates to programming and staffing. Some of the ways OYC has addressed these challenges are to aggressively seek out funding and build relationships to establish expansion projects at school-based sites to serve more youth.

OYC also sometimes faces the challenge of losing qualified staff to more lucrative opportunities, as well as having existing staff overextended in their responsibilities. OYC triumphs over these challenges by finding innovative funding sources, creatively designing programs, and building relationships that can be leveraged to perform the necessary work. Finally, the Overtown neighborhood is also in the process of major development and gentrification. Therefore, OYC faces the challenge of remaining relevant as the population and demographics in the neighborhood change.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?

OYC is embraced by the community. In addition to its enrolled youth and families, the Center is a safe haven and common meeting ground for many residents and organizations. OYC is consistently engaging with the population it serves to determine what the needs of the community are. Therefore, the population plays a major role in shaping the services provided. For example, through outreach and



community surveys, OYC determined older youth had too much idle time and needed to learn basic college readiness/career skills. OYC then implemented an IE2 (Inspire. Educate. Employ.) Program designed to keep youth off the streets and engaged in productive activities that equip them to succeed in the twenty-first century marketplace.

HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

In every community, there are youth who may have more challenges to overcome than others due to socioeconomic conditions that make it more difficult to succeed in school or in life. The services that are provided by OYC and SEI can be provided in any community and are most effective in communities where wraparound services are critical. Organizations that are serious about changing the trajectory of systematically impoverished communities should consider comprehensive program models like OYC's replica of SEI. These programs work because they take into consideration a number of factors critical in tackling issues that are significant barriers to success. While comprehensive models may be a little more expensive than traditional afterschool programs, the impact is often greater and spans significant targets of influence (i.e., the child, the family, the school system, the community, etc.). Government entities should explore models that are "grassroots" by definition and informed by communities who are the consumers of government services.

Grassroots organizations are often in the trenches, thus giving them an unmatched understanding of critical components that are effective for elevating the communities it serves to the next level. Therefore, OYC encourages funders, government entities, and communities all over the nation to work to understand the needs of the people they serve and make the necessary investments to implement programs that work most effectively for their intended target markets. Funders should not mandate that an organization stick to a prescribed method without knowing whether or not said method will be effective in the community where the organization it is funding is located. Additionally, communities and government entities must embrace collective impact as their approach to achieving optimal results.

WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

The single most important thing people should know about OYC is that its effectiveness could not have been achieved without the implementation of wraparound services for children and families by people who not only understand the needs of Black children and their families, but make it their daily mission to use their gifts, talents, and passion to support them.