



Helping High-Risk Young Men Learn and Practice the Skills They Need to Get a Job and Stay Employed

Young men's violence-intervention project—a pilot project for transitional employment and case management in Massachusetts

SUMMARY

In 2009, Roca, a 22-year-old youth development organization in Chelsea, Mass., launched the Young Men's Violence Intervention Project in four Massachusetts' communities. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) provided funding for the first year of this three-year initiative. The model combines intensive case management, work experience and life skills training to help high-risk young men learn and practice the skills they need to get a job and stay employed. Roca works with some of the most disengaged young people in the Boston area.

The Problem

Nationally, 10 to 15 percent of all young people ages 14 to 24 are disconnected from work or education, and addressing youth violence is a public health priority. "America's young people are dying. They are dying quickly from guns and gangs and slowly from poverty and isolation," says Molly Baldwin, president of Roca who was the executive director during the time of the grant.

The Roca Model

The Roca model provides:

- Intensive case management from a youth worker who is "unrelenting" in keeping participants engaged, referred to by Roca as a "transformational relationship"
- Subsidized, or transitional, employment for nine to 12 months, and potentially longer, to introduce young men to the expectations and responsibilities of work
- Education and life skills training one day per week in areas such as GED preparation, financial literacy, woodworking, carpentry and culinary arts

- Peacemaking Circles to help the young men with conflict resolution and job readiness

At the heart of the model is the recognition that intensive and repeated efforts are required to influence the behavior of at-risk young men. The transformational relationship is essential. "It is the relentlessness of a youth worker who shows up day after day, no matter what, that awakens hope in a young person," says Baldwin.

Typically, participants join a work crew, make a mistake that costs them their job and are reengaged by youth workers. Project staff members recognize that it can sometimes take 18 to 24 months for high-risk young people to put in 60 days of work. "This is a relapse model. The program allows for multiple entries," says Baldwin. "We do not want to lose these young men."

Activities

During the first year of the project, Roca signed contracts with 11 public and private entities in the Boston-area communities of Chelsea, Revere and East Boston to provide them work crews (see the [Appendix](#)). Workers were paid through these contracts to undertake jobs such as trash and graffiti removal, lot cleanup and landscaping.

Roca staff also trained the Hampden County Sheriff's Department in Springfield, Mass., and the United Teen Equity Center (UTEC) in Lowell, Mass., in the model. UTEC was initially unable to negotiate a work contract, but now has a contract signed to begin in the summer of 2010. RWJF has supported UTEC's work engaging at-risk and gang-involved youth on the streets through the *Robert Wood Johnson Local Funding Partnerships* program.

Roca subcontracted with Lili-An Elkins of LAE Consulting in Mt. Laurel, N.J., an expert on transitional employment, to provide technical assistance and manage the evaluation.

Key Results

During the first year:

- **Roca enrolled 112 young men, ages 16–24, in the Young Men's Violence Intervention Project.** More than three-quarters of them had previous encounters with the criminal justice system. Many were also involved with gangs, had a history of substance abuse and lacked a work history or a high school diploma.
- **Roca administered three and a half work crews, consisting of seven young men and one adult supervisor** (the half-crew had fewer participants—three as opposed to seven).
- **By the end of the first year:**
 - 86 youth remained active in the program.

- 35 had been placed in unsubsidized employment, with some continuing to receive other services. Of this group, 21 remained employed for at least 30 days and five remained employed for at least 120 days.
- 15 had reentered the criminal justice system.
- **The Hampden County Sheriff's Department enrolled 17 young men in its project, based on the Roca model, and administered one work crew.** All of the participants were gang members or juvenile offenders. After the first year, three had been placed in jobs and five had reentered the criminal justice system.
- **The Sheriff's Department could not fully implement the intensive case management component of the model, which was not consistent with its available resources or organizational mandate** (a Roca youth worker has a caseload of 25 young people while sheriff department caseworkers have more than 350 clients apiece). The department remained committed to the model and after the first year, Roca agreed to assume responsibility for administering the program.

Lessons Learned

1. **Any violence intervention program must tolerate working through the failures of its participants and the slow pace at which they change.** The Roca model recognizes that high-risk youth will need repeated support. "If they mess up—and they will—our youth workers go after them to keep them engaged," says Baldwin, the project director.
2. **A single approach to transitional employment may not be enough.** Roca is working to develop staged levels of employment that gradually impart higher levels of skills and training as the young people become more committed to the process. (Baldwin/Project Director)
3. **Intensive case management is essential.** Roca initially believed a partner could deviate from its model, but concluded that the transformational relationship was not negotiable. "While transitional employment is used as a hook to engage young people, the transformational relationship is a critical component to helping young people move through a change process and reduce their violent behaviors," said Baldwin.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) provided a grant of \$250,000 to support the first year of this three-year project, which ran from December 2009 through February 2010. Other funders include: Butler Foundation (\$50,000), Fireman Foundation (\$100,000), Strategic Grant Partners (\$40,000) and Weinberg Foundation (\$75,000).

Afterward

Roca continues to operate work crews in the cities surrounding Boston—Chelsea, East Boston and Revere—and it has expanded to Charlestown, with the goal of serving 725 young people by 2012. UTEC in Lowell will administer a work crew beginning in the summer of 2010, but Roca will no longer be involved in this initiative.

As of July 2010, Roca will assume responsibility for the Springfield model, in partnership with the Hampden County Sheriff's Department and others. Strategic Grant Partners (\$700,000), the Beverage Foundation (\$20,000) and individual donors are providing funding, and the Massachusetts Department of Transportation has signed a three-month contract for a work crew.

In February 2010, Roca received a \$2.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor's "Pathways Out of Poverty" initiative to launch 3G Jobs! ("From Green Gangs to Green Jobs"). Based on Roca's transitional employment model, 3G Jobs! focuses on jobs in green construction, weatherization and other green industries.

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APPENDIX

Work Crew Contracts

(Current as of the end date of the program; provided by the program's management; not verified by RWJF.)

- City of Chelsea (\$108,000)
- City of Revere (\$15,000)
- Clark Companies (\$445)
- Department of Housing and Community Development, City of Springfield (\$40,000)
- HP Hood (\$1,256)
- Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (\$22,619)
- Massachusetts Water Resource Authority (\$70,000)
- Medford Housing Authority (\$20,111)
- Pallin Cleaning Contract (\$60,000)
- VNA of Eastern Massachusetts (\$3,200)
- Shannon Grant (\$28,700)