

# Better Futures Minnesota Helps Turn Lives Around

An integrated network of housing and services to help men with histories of substance abuse, mental illness, and incarceration change their lives

### INTRODUCTION

Better Futures Minnesota, <sup>1</sup> a project of Better Futures Enterprises, takes a comprehensive approach to helping high-risk men, mostly African American, in Minnesota's Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul) region change their lives.

The men, who have a history of substance abuse, mental illness, chronic unemployment, incarceration, and homelessness, receive supports designed to stabilize them and support their personal transformation. Better Future Minnesota provides a package that includes short-term transitional housing, job training and opportunities, affordable permanent housing, expanded access to health services, and participation in a community of other men trying to turn their lives around. The program emphasizes personal resilience and the unique value of every man. See "Making the Commitment to Turn Their Lives Around."

Three grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) totaling \$6.75 million (2007–2014<sup>2</sup>) provide funding to implement and test the model. The project also aims to promote replication in other communities.

Steven G. Thomas founded Better Futures and serves as president and CEO. Formerly with the Corporation for Supportive Housing, he also served as assistant commissioner for the New York City Department of Corrections and director of the city's emergency housing and financial assistance programs for homeless families.

See Appendix 1 for a list of people interviewed for this report.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Better Futures Minnesota was formerly known as The NetWork for Better Futures.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> ID# 58045 (\$450,000, December 2006–November 2007); ID# 63040 (\$2.8 million, December 2007–November 2010); ID# 63040 (\$3.5 million, February 15, 2011–February 14, 2014).

### WHAT IS BETTER FUTURES ABOUT?

The purpose of Better Futures is to fuel and guide its men's desire to turn their lives around and walk a new path toward better health and success. Better Futures staff is also intent on changing the debilitating, costly systems and practices that produce poor results and perpetuate the chaos and cycles of dependency experienced by high-risk men. For more on the lives of Better Futures participants, read the sidebar, "Making the Commitment to Turn Their Lives Around."

Most men engaged in Better Futures Minnesota have lived much of their lives locked out of conventional society. Living in chaotic and often dangerous circumstances, they go uncounted in most data describing poverty and social problems. "But we believe—affirmed by our five years of experience—that each man is important, lovable, and, with the appropriate support, has the potential to improve himself, be productive, and contribute to his family and community," says Thomas.

"Moreover, we believe that the status quo for high-risk, vulnerable adults is ineffective and financially unsustainable. But the core issues cannot be adequately addressed by marginal adjustments in practices or funding. Better Futures is developing and testing a comprehensive care model with the power to achieve better outcomes by addressing many of the root causes of chronic poverty."

Better Futures is trying to test and demonstrate effective ways to integrate the care and services this high-risk population needs to become connected with normal society. Says Thomas, "A big part of what we are doing when we embrace and engage these guys is help them make that transition from the old normal to the new normal." See "Making the Commitment to Turn Their Lives Around."

Better Futures' long-term goal is to show that it can lower recidivism and the costs of providing health and social services, creating incentives for policy-makers to shift resources from crisis and institutional services to preventive and human development services.

"We are testing a bold idea and a transformational model of success that creates jobs, achieves better results, and reduces public spending. We are trying to advance transformation in three arenas. One is in the policy arena, a second is in the area of practices, a third is transformation among people, starting with our men," says Thomas.

## WHAT PROBLEM IS THE PROJECT ADDRESSING?

Better Futures Minnesota's participants are typically isolated, living on the fringes of society, and cycling through costly and fragmented public services and systems, including emergency rooms, detox centers, substance abuse treatment programs, and jails and prisons. Many have experienced trauma unimaginable to most Americans, and

struggle with post-traumatic stress, brain injuries, and depression. At least half have some form of mental illness.

Although Better Futures has been described as a "reentry program" after incarceration, staff consider that a bit of a misnomer, because most of these men have never fully engaged with mainstream society.

Existing systems and practices do not make it easy for them to do so. Public housing often excludes men with a history of incarceration; private landlords refuse to rent to them; and employers are reluctant to hire them. These men are also poorly educated and lack basic socialization skills, and the jobs for which they qualify are low paying, if they exist at all.

"Whether intentional or not," says Thomas, "our society has turned its back on a group of people, overwhelmingly men of color, who are labeled as chronically homeless,

chronically unemployed, frequent offenders, frequent users.

"The systems and practices meant to supervise, punish and/or treat these men have locked them out of opportunities in mainstream society and locked them into a perpetual cycle of violence, dependency, unemployment, homelessness, emergency care, and incarceration. The cost of managing and maintaining these systems is enormous. The economic and social costs to taxpayers and the human costs to

"Some people want to do things in life, but they don't know how, like how the community they left would view them. So if they see somebody doing the same thing who comes from the same community, it's real empowering."—former participant and staff member

the men and their families are significant and unsustainable."

Better Futures is designed to break this cycle and reduce the human and financial costs it generates.

"We have put up so many legal barriers that it is very difficult for people with records to get another start," says Judge Pamela G. Alexander, Better Futures Minnesota board member and president of the Council on Crime and Justice, which advocates for a more balanced approach to criminal justice. Most of society regards ex-offenders as "throwaway individuals," she says, "but we look at them as men who can get back on their feet through their energies and efforts to become better men."

### **HOW DOES THE MODEL WORK?**

Better Futures has evolved from a compelling idea to a fully operational model that has

enrolled more than 600 men since its 2008 launch. Participants are referred from county jails, state prisons, and other state institutions, and Better Futures Minnesota carefully evaluates their motivation to change their lives before accepting them.

Each man must try to seek and hold a job, remain drug and alcohol free, pay child support, and avoid criminal activity. On average, the men's age is 32, and they read at a seventh-grade level, according to Darryl Lindsey, Better Futures' chief operating officer.

"Everything is productive in what we doing, achieving goals and budgeting and just everything we are doing is brand new."—former participant and staff member

Eight nonprofit partners in the Twin Cities—six involved since the project's inception—help provide structured support for the men (see Appendix 2 for list of key partners). Better Futures' board includes a representative from each partner organization.

The model provides core services integrated into what Thomas calls a "cohesive system of opportunity."

"We intentionally seek out and engage men who want a better future," he says. "We recognize that people do not experience problems in isolation, so we cannot solve problems in isolation. We have an entrepreneurial model of success based on the belief that for our men to walk a better path and stay on that path, they need to experience a strong, vibrant community and meaningful relationships."

Community and relationships anchor the four fundamentals of Better Futures' new model:

- Housing
- Jobs

- Health
- Life Coaching

Better Futures aims to finance its innovative approach through earned income from its business unit, Better Futures Minnesota, and from pay-for-performance contracts with counties, state agencies, and health plans.

• **Safe and affordable housing.** Participants live for four to six months in a 32-bed dormitory, with two meals served daily. The men pay \$25 weekly for their lodging,

complete assigned chores, and attend training sessions designed to build life skills and empower them.

The men must earn the opportunity to lease their own apartments—which Better Futures then subsidizes for 20 months—by demonstrating readiness, such as by creating a resume, maintaining a bank account, and securing outside employment.

opportunities. Most men have little employment history and have never learned the habits, attitudes, and skills needed to keep a job. Through its business unit, the organization offers closely supervised work experiences, along with feedback and guidance on appropriate workplace behaviors. (See more in Better Futures' Business Activities.)

"Employment is so fundamental in so many ways...Regular employment, even irregular employment, is a means to establish personal discipline and a "The idea of bringing together multiple service providers all connected around the needs of a specific, very needy population makes a lot of sense. It is a visionary model."—Arthur Berman, MBA, president and CEO of Twin Cities RISE!, a Better Futures partner

pattern of being responsible," says Arthur Berman, MBA, president and CEO of Twin Cities RISE!, which provides work skills to low-income individuals, and is a Better Futures partner. "Ultimately, the success of these men will depend largely on their ability to get a job and keep a job."

• Access to primary care and behavioral health services. Better Futures participants, who have historically relied primarily on emergency rooms and urgent care clinics, receive guidance on how to gain regular access to health care.

Under eligibility made possible by the Affordable Care Act and the state's early efforts to expand Medicaid, most men are enrolled in that program. Better Futures coordinates care with the help of its partners, including Medica Health Plans, a nonprofit health maintenance organization; Hennepin County Medical Center, which provides a medical home; and Mental Health Resources, which provides mental health counseling and access to mental health care.

Community-building. Regular community dinners and twice-weekly meetings
provide practical information on managing finances and other life skills, promote
personal development, and encourage the men to share insights they have gained.

Life coaches work with the men to develop a personal prosperity plan and provide intensive support 24/7. Assistance includes gaining access to critical services, maintaining housing, avoiding and coping with substance abuse relapse, and reconnecting with friends and family.

"The idea of bringing together multiple service providers all connected around the needs of a specific, very needy population makes a lot of sense. It is a visionary model," says Berman.

Paul Kohls agrees. He was a Republican legislator in the state House of Representatives when he first learned about Better Futures. Initially a skeptic, he became a champion, and joined the board after leaving state office.

Two features of the program especially appealed to him. One, he says, was "the fact that men are held accountable for their participation in the program. They have to want it, and they have to stay engaged."

The second key feature, according to Kohls, is the model's emphasis on connected services. "I saw program after program as a legislator come through my office saying help us with employing at-risk individuals, help us with housing, with health care, with chemical dependency.

"If someone is slacking, you can always tap him on the back and say, 'Come on man, let's do this.' That's the spirit of the program. There is always going to be someone there that is going to do that.—former Better Futures participant and staff member

This was one program that took a more comprehensive approach... That to me is what is powerful."

### **Better Futures' Business Activities**

Better Futures Minnesota creates work opportunities for participants through Better Futures' work crews or Better Futures' recycling and reuse lines of business, which both help to fund the core program. The original goal was to provide short-term, part-time jobs through contracts with government or private companies, and then to guide the men to permanent jobs. Crews clean about 300 lots in Minneapolis and Hennepin counties, and accept one-time assignments from private employers or a university.

Most men, however, have not been able to move on "either because they are not ready or because there is no work out there," Thomas said.

As a result, its business unit began focusing on developing its own businesses, including one designed to divert materials from the region's waste stream. Under a contract with Hennepin County Environmental Services, for example, the men collect and process building materials, household fixtures, furniture, books, and plastics, selling reusable items and extracting metals and other salable goods.

That approach allows the county to redirect funds that would otherwise have paid for landfill services "in a way that provides a broader array of benefits," said Peter McLaughlin, MPA, a county commissioner who helped negotiate the contract. Along with promoting reuse and recycling, the program "is also getting us some jobs outcomes that we need for our ex-offenders. It is more of an integrated approach to how government spends money to get multiple bottom-line benefits."

Better Futures' business activities brought in nearly \$2 million between 2008 and 2012, which covered about half of the core program's operating costs. Those funds could become "the most valuable of all," because they are uncommitted, noted Nancy Barrand, MPA, RWJF senior advisor for program development. "Earned revenue can be put toward whatever purposes Better Futures needs it for... Eventually, you want the enterprise to provide the majority of your budget."

Every dollar invested in Better Futures produces up to \$4 from the combination of taxes and child support paid by participants and the savings that result from reduced criminal behavior, homelessness, and use of social services.

# Pay for Performance

From its inception, Better Futures Minnesota has aimed to sustain itself by securing "payfor-performance" contracts with county and state agencies, health plans, and other service providers that promote accountability and reward results. These contracts reward Better Futures if it achieves certain outcomes for its men, and penalize it for others (for example, if they are not consistently employed, return to prison for new crimes, or fail to pay child support).

An example is Better Futures' \$300,000 contract with Hennepin County Human Services. The county agency pays Better Futures \$200,000 to provide specific services, such as signing men up for health insurance and guiding them to complete employment applications. The remaining \$100,000 is based on performance, with payment linked to four outcomes: whether a participant has signed a lease in his own name, obtained a job

outside Better Futures Minnesota, enrolled and remained enrolled in health coverage, and stayed out of jail for crimes against people.

Better Futures is also negotiating a pay-for-performance contract in which it receives payment from a health plan to manage care for its participants covered under the plan.

The fees reflect the extent to which the men avoid relying on emergency rooms for care.

"The thing that we have always stressed is, 'Force us to prove that we are doing this with outcomes,'" emphasizes Fred LaFleur, retired commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Corrections and a Better Futures Minnesota board member. "We make the argument [to government officials]: this is where you want to be five and 10 years from now. [Otherwise,] you are spending money with no results."

Negotiating pay-for-performance contracts has generally proven difficult, according to Better Futures staff. Resistance comes from many quarters, "I allow myself to be vulnerable enough as a man, something that Black men don't really do, ask for help. I humbled myself and asked for help, and I was consistent at being positive and having a positive attitude." — Vincent, former Better Futures client and staff

including providers who believe the model suggests that their own services may not be cost-effective, and government agencies accustomed to purchasing itemized services.

# **Other Funding**

The state awarded \$3.7 million for Better Futures in its first four years. These funds included \$1.5 million over two years from the Department of Corrections to enable Better Futures to enroll returning prisoners. However, the relationship was uneasy (see more on this issue in the section What Are the Challenges and Lessons Learned?), and the department did not renew the funds.

A \$1.3 million award in 2009 from the Minnesota Office of Justice primarily funded coaching and employment training. State housing and employment agencies have also provided funding, as have Hennepin County, Better Futures partners, and private foundations.

Facing severe budget cutbacks, the state allocated only \$100,000 in 2012, and future allocations are uncertain.

### WHAT ARE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT RESULTS SO FAR?

In 2011, WestEd in Boston began an evaluation of Better Futures Minnesota's impact on recidivism, jobs and wages, child support payments, and the use of health care services and their cost.<sup>3</sup> Preliminary results will be available every six months beginning in April 2013, and a final report and analysis should be available sometime in early 2015.

Meanwhile, based on their own tracking of key activities and outcomes for the 600-plus participants served so far, Better Futures staff members report these results:

- Return on investment: Every dollar invested in Better Futures Minnesota produces up to \$4 from the combination of taxes and child support paid by participants and the savings that result from reduced criminal behavior, homelessness, and use of social services.
- percent of the men living in Better Futures-funded housing are employed or in school, compared with 25 percent to 30 percent of similar men outside the program. Better Futures Minnesota has provided some form of employment to 380 men.

Better Futures hopes to expand its business venture and capacity to provide long-term employment. "Government has fundamentally changed, the economy has fundamentally changed. We have had to rethink what role our business enterprise should play in supporting the transformation of these men."—Steven Thomas, Better Futures, President & CEO

- **Recidivism:** Among men who stay with Better Futures at least 90 days, about 9 percent return to prison within three years because of new felony convictions, compared with state recidivism rates of 26 percent.
- **Child support:** Some 60 percent of men with child support obligations begin to pay at least a portion of what they owe while they are enrolled in Better Futures. Typically, only 15 percent of men outside Better Futures with similar backgrounds pay any child support.
- **Health insurance:** About 90 percent of the men have health insurance, primarily Medicaid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> RWJF grant ID#s 69147 (\$124,402, August 2011–January 2012) and 70408 (\$237,448, November 2012–October 2013) funded the evaluations.

### WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED?

In reports to the state and RWJF and interviews for this report, Better Futures Minnesota's staff and board members noted these challenges and lessons:

- The lives of Better Futures participants have been steeped in "trauma they have inflicted and trauma inflicted on them," says Thomas. "That fundamentally affects how they view themselves and how you need to engage them, inspire them, coach them.
  - "Whatever we do needs to be grounded in this notion of traumainformed care, healing hurt people," he says. Staff members have become much more "intentional" about using it as the framework for life coaching, wellness support, and supervision. Building and sustaining a sense of community to reduce isolation and foster trust is critical.
- Better Futures participants have profound cognitive and behavioral challenges; they have never developed the skills, habits, or attitudes needed for the workplace; they are often financially and socially unprepared to be responsible

"A big surprise for all of us was how responsive they were to help. I'm always amazed when you have these guys showing up just because all of a sudden someone is willing to say, 'I care enough about you to be there. There is possibility here.'"—Fred LaFleur, retired commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Corrections and a Better Futures Minnesota board member

tenants; and many of them lack basic life and literacy skills—from performing household chores to paying bills.

In response, Better Futures made a number of changes to its model, including its approach to housing. For example, in its first 18 months, Better Futures held a master lease to 124 apartments in seven buildings, to provide subsidized rentals. But because most men were not ready to live independently, Better Futures relinquished those units and created the dormitory as a transition step.

"That allows us to provide housing in the least-expensive manner possible," said Thomas. "It is not just to help the men demonstrate their ability to live on their own, but also helps reinforce this sense of community, the new normal. 'You are not alone, there are a bunch of other good men who are with you to support you, to advise you, to help you change."

Better Futures Minnesota also hired a psychologist to bolster the staff's ability to recognize and address cognitive and mental health challenges, and built relationships with community-based clinicians.

Former county administrator LaFleur says the depth of the men's needs is no surprise. "A bigger surprise for all of us was how responsive they were to help. I'm always amazed when you have these guys showing up just because all of a sudden someone

is willing to say, 'I care enough about you to be there. There is possibility here.'"

and job training programs
often do not accommodate the
nonlinear way in which these
men change. "A lot of the
training and services that these
programs now provide totally
misses the mark," RWJF's
Barrand insists. "We assume
that [these men] can sit in class
and learn computers. We just
assume they have certain skills
they were never taught."

"If I have been in prison and you won't let me into the mainstream, you are leaving me to perpetuate that life, and there are people waiting to take me back into that life... You have just defeated me as a human being."—Louis King, president and CEO of Summit Academy OIC, a provider of vocational training and job placement in Minneapolis and a Better Futures partner

In reality, the process of personal transformation is filled

with detours, disappointments, and restarts. Meeting the needs of these men requires dexterity. Staff struggle to find ways to measure success that balance high expectations and accountability with the reality that most men will relapse periodically.

- The idea that participants would transition from work with Better Futures' business unit to stable, full-time jobs proved unrealistic, especially in a weak economy. Most of the men find only part-time and sporadic work, and even those who do find full-time jobs are often paid too little to allow them to fulfill all their responsibilities, including paying for child support and housing.
  - Better Futures hopes to expand its business venture and capacity to provide long-term employment. "Government has fundamentally changed, the economy has fundamentally changed," Thomas notes. "We have had to rethink what role our business enterprise should play in supporting the transformation of these men."
- Some men stop working when payroll deductions for child support begin. Courts can deduct up to 65 percent of a man's wages for child support. If he is working at a minimum-wage job paying \$7.25 an hour, the deduction leaves \$4.71. Better Futures refers men to the nonprofit Father's Project in Minneapolis for help in adjusting

payments, but the process is slow, and some men stop working or leave Better Futures before obtaining adjustments.

Without policy changes, such as designating more affordable housing for these
men and eliminating questions about felony convictions on job applications, exoffenders cannot get a foothold in the mainstream.

Better Futures' Darryl Lindsey tells the story of two men working as groundskeepers under a contact between Better Futures and a private company. After nine months of stellar work, the company wanted to put them on its own payroll and asked the men to complete standard job applications. But when human resources employees reviewed the applications, they disqualified the men—not only for permanent jobs, but also for continued contract work—because of their felony convictions.

"If I have been in prison and you won't let me into the mainstream, you are leaving me to perpetuate that life, and there are people waiting to take me back into that life," warns Louis King, president

Better Futures has found it easier to work at the county level, which has seven commissioners and a less complex bureaucracy, than with the state. Yet "even after the commissioners speak, there are lots of ways for county employees to drag their feet."—Fred LaFleur, retired commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Corrections and a Better Futures Minnesota board member

and CEO of Summit Academy OIC, a provider of vocational training and job placement in Minneapolis and a Better Futures partner. "Wow, you have just defeated me as a human being."

• Practices for addressing technical parole violations break momentum for men trying to establish themselves in the community. Even if they have been working and paying child support, Better Futures participants are too often sent back to prison for violating their conditions of release, not for committing a new crime. Violations can include drinking, using drugs, or failing to report to a parole officer.

"We understand the need to hold men accountable for complying with their release conditions. In some cases, technical violators do need to be incarcerated," acknowledge project staff in a report to the Minnesota Office of Justice. "However, in many cases appropriate sanctions could be applied in the community, thus avoiding the costly return to prison and the disruption of work and community life."

• Public-sector agencies and unions resist the Better Futures model, fearing competition for limited funds and a threat to jobs. "The agencies figure, if the legislature gives [Better Futures] something, that something is going to come from their budgets," notes LaFleur. "Self-preservation and self-interest is always the 500-pound gorilla in the room.... Systems don't change willingly."

"The way we budget in Minnesota makes it difficult to fund a multifaceted program," adds former representative Kohls. "We get turf wars among the agencies." Better Futures "isn't just about reentry. It is about health care. It is about employment. It is about housing. The attitude of an individual agency is, 'Why should our budget be hit for all these other areas?"

Better Futures Minnesota has found it easier to work at the county level, which has seven commissioners and a less complex bureaucracy, than with the state. Yet "even after the commissioners speak, there are lots of ways for county employees to drag their feet," notes LaFleur. "What is their motive for change? Where is the incentive for them to do anything special?"

### WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Better Futures staff members continue to revise their model, seek pay-for-performance and other contracts with government agencies and private companies in the Twin Cities region, and encourage other communities to adapt the approach. Potential partners in Los Angeles and in Omaha, Neb., have expressed particular interest in the Better Futures model.

"Is this a model you can take out to other communities and make it work?" asks Glenn Andis, senior vice president of government programs at Medica Health Plans. "Conceptually, I would say absolutely ... but it still takes that leadership and willingness of the parties to roll up their sleeves and work together."

Despite the challenges, Thomas agrees. "The concept and operating model are compelling and intriguing to people." He believes there is an "appetite for pay for performance... We may find other communities where they are ready for this concept."

In March 2014, RWJF made a bridge grant to Better Futures to maintain operations while assessing the sustainability of an integrated re-entry model for men engaged with the criminal justice system. <sup>4</sup> This grant was made in preparation for planned RWJF funding to support the establishment of the NetWork for Better Futures as a national model for reentry into the community after incarceration and to replicate it in three additional communities.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> ID# 71700 (\$299,134, March 1, 2014 to May 31, 2014).

#### MAKING THE COMMITMENT TO TURN THEIR LIVES AROUND

# The men of the Better Futures Minnesota<sup>5</sup> tell their stories

Jermaine, now 31, has spent most of his life behind bars. <sup>6</sup> At 13, he was incarcerated for murder. Sentenced as a juvenile, he was released at 19, but returned to prison again and again for crimes that included unlawful

use of a weapon and armed hijacking of a vehicle.

On his last trip back to prison, Jermaine knew it was time to make a lasting change. "I ran into some obstacles that led me back to jail, and while I was in jail, I was looking around and looking around," he says. One thing became clear to him: "I'm not supposed to be here, what am I doing here?"

The "we're there for you" approach is characteristic of what Better Futures offers men who are willing to make the commitment to turn their lives around.

After hearing about Better Futures Minnesota from fellow inmates, he

connected with Jeff Williams, who recruits men into the program. Better Futures Minnesota, a project of Better Futures Enterprises provides a package of housing, employment and support services to the at-risk population it serves in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn. Most of them are African-American. Read the Progress Report for more information on Better Futures.

"I actually got out on a Saturday and called his phone at 5:30 in the morning. I was expecting to hear one of them, 'Hi, you've reached Jeff Williams, my business hours are from 9 to 5, Monday through Friday," recalls Jermaine. Instead, Williams himself answered the crack-of-dawn call. "That was real big, so I got a little comfortable there."

The "we're-there-for-you" approach is characteristic of what Better Futures offers men who are willing to make the commitment to turn their lives around.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Better Futures Minnesota is the new name of the former NetWork for Better Futures. It is a project of Better Futures Enterprises.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Some of the men in this profile have asked that their real names not be used. Jermaine and Vincent are real names.

#### From the Old World to the New

Most of the men transitioning through the Better Futures say its emphasis on personal resiliency has helped change everything about their lives outside prison, taking them from the old world of the streets to a new world as respectable citizens.

Vincent, who had been locked up for 17 of his 40 years, says that when a man gets

released from prison, he may think, "Well, I really don't want to go over there and do that negativity, I don't want to hang out with that crowd of people, but really what are my options?"

Both Better Futures staff and other participants help provide some answers, but each man is ultimately expected to take charge. "I believe it takes strength, determination and a plan," says Norman, age 37. "Better Futures can offer us everything, but if we don't have a plan, or we don't have strength and determination,

"Better Futures can offer us everything, but if we don't have a plan, or we don't have strength and determination, then none of it will work.... So I think it starts with us and what we want to do."—Norman

then none of it will work.... So I think it starts with us and what we want to do."

George is one of the willing. "I'm a taxpayer now," says the 39-year-old man. "I got job skills, everything from demolition and snow removal, all type of stuff I do I learned through Better Futures. They are a real positive with me in my life."

One thing George learned is that sometimes, "It is okay to be broke. When you are in the other world and you broke, you ain't going to be broke for long." But doing an honest day's work is different—it means waiting for the pay that comes with it. "You really got to humble yourself when it comes to money, you got to budget, really budget. In the old world, I used to do what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it. Right now, I can't. I got a son I got to take care of first, he get everything before I do. .... A paycheck is a paycheck. Wait on it."

Jermaine, who has just moved into the first home he has ever been able to call his own, also feels that he's on the right path. "Yesterday, I signed the lease, got the keys and my very own apartment, so life is just great. I'm smiling, I'm happy."

But he knows the lure of familiar and risky paths has not entirely vanished. "The old world was like the bad life, the old life. Where I think I was winning, I was living in fear. Didn't want to be around this person, didn't want to be around that person, too paranoid. The working world is a little better, but every time you think about that old world, that is the challenge, to stay on this side, because it is so easy to go to the other world."

That's Sam's struggle, too. At 21, he is the youngest participant of Better Futures and since his release after three years of incarceration, he has focused on meeting entirely new expectations. "I was tired of gangbanging, I was tired of doing the negative. I knew if I came out [of prison] I would probably be killed or probably wind up killing somebody, or just doing something that was going to hurt somebody."

But knowing that he could still be ambushed by old temptations doesn't make the alternative path all that much easier to follow. "I'm not going to lie, it's very, very hard. The life I'm used to living.... It's way different from working now."

# A Community of Men

A slogan often heard often around the Better Futures is "no one of us is more able than all of us." It speaks to the power of community, which is on full display every Monday and Friday evening when the men come together to talk frankly.

"I was tired of gangbanging, I was tired of doing the negative.... I'm not going to lie, it's very, very hard. The life I'm used to living.... It's way different from working now.... Now I'm working through Better Futures, I feel like I'm becoming a man."—Sam

"I looked forward to those meetings because coming out of incarceration, not having a support system, could easily deter me or anyone to make the wrong choice or decision," says Vincent. First a participant in Better Futures, and then a staff member, Vincent has since become a recruiter and personal empowerment facilitator at Twin Cities RISE!, a partner agency that provides work skills to low-income individuals.

"Having someone who you believe cares to say, 'Hey, here is another perspective, maybe look at it like this, or did you think about that?'... It was everything. It was everything."

Positive peer pressure is another important tool. "If someone is slacking, you can always tap him on the back and say, 'Come on man, let's do this." says Jermaine. "That's the spirit of the program. There is always going to be someone there that is going to do that."

By surrounding the men with others from similar backgrounds who share a determination to change, Better Futures creates a safe place to acknowledge vulnerability. "It becomes a community instantly," said Norman. "To be able to see men actually being vulnerable and open and able to communicate... was definitely encouraging. I just took it and ran with it."

Getting Sam on track is something of a pet project for the older men. "Everybody supports me 'cause I'm the youngest one, they ride my heels a lot," he says. "They don't want to see me fall off. I try to push myself and push others... I don't see too much negative around me, everybody supports me, everybody supports each other. I never been around an atmosphere where everybody just push each other."

# **Looking Ahead**

A common theme among the men is that Better Futures creates possibilities.

George has been able to bring his son to live with him. "When I left, he was three months old, when I came back he was three years old, so I missed a whole lot. I'm not trying to miss anything else, tell you the truth, I don't plan on missing nothing else."

For Sam, it has really been about learning how to grow up. "Before I came in prison I was a little boy, I was 18. Now I'm working through

"You come to Better Futures not really sure of what to expect. But then once you are in it, you understand. 'Wait a minute, there is opportunity for me here to be that man that Sam talked about or to be a citizen or a taxpayer or to be a better parent, a father.' That is huge for someone coming out of prison."—Vincent

Better Futures, I feel like I'm becoming a man."

"You come to Better Futures not really sure of what to expect," says Vincent. "But then once you are in it, you understand. 'Wait a minute, there is opportunity for me here to be that man that Sam talked about or to be a citizen or a taxpayer or to be a better parent, a father.' That is huge for someone coming out of prison."

Prepared by: Karyn Feiden

Reviewed by: Sandra Hackman and Molly McKaughan

Program Officer: Nancy Barrand Program Area: Vulnerable Populations Grant ID#: 58045, 63040, 68465

Project Director: Steven G. Thomas, MA (612) 325-7856; sthomas@betterfutures.net

### **APPENDIX 1**

### **List of Interviewees**

#### **Better Futures Staff**

Steven G. Thomas

President and CEO

**Darryl Lindsey** 

**Chief Operating Officer** 

Makram El-Amin

Life Coach

#### **Board Members**

Judge Pamela G. Alexander

President

Council on Crime and Justice

Minneapolis, Minn.

Glenn Andis, PhD

Senior Vice President, Government Programs

Medica Health Plans

Minneapolis, Minn.

Arthur Berman, MBA

President and CEO

Twin Cities RISE!

Minneapolis, Minn.

Thomas P. Fulton, MPA

President

Family Housing Fund Minneapolis, Minn.

Mary S. Gabler

Community Relations Manager

Wells Fargo

St. Paul, Minn.

Louis J. King II

President and CEO

Summit Academy OIC

Minneapolis, Minn.

**Paul Kohls** 

Senior Vice President and General Counsel

**AgStar Financial Services** 

Apple Valley, Minn.

Fred LaFleur

Commissioner (retired)

Minnesota Department of Corrections

St. Paul, Minn.

Other Interviewee

Peter McLaughlin, MPA

Hennepin County Commissioner

Minneapolis, Minn.

# **APPENDIX 2**

# **Key Better Futures Partners**

Six nonprofits in the Twin Cities area are founding partners of Better Futures Minnesota:

- Family Housing Fund: Safe, affordable, and sustainable housing
- Medica: Minnesota's largest health maintenance organization
- Summit Academy OIC: Community-based vocational training and job placement
- Turning Point: Substance abuse treatment for African Americans

- RS Eden: Substance abuse treatment, supportive housing, and community corrections services
- Twin Cities RISE!: Employment training for people in poverty

# Newer partners include:

- Hennepin County Medical Center: Medical home for all Better Futures participants
- Mental Health Resources: Training in life skills and mental health services. (As of August 2012, Better Futures Minnesota hired its own MSW and now works with several new mental health providers and psychologists. Once participants became eligible for Medicaid, a network of mental health treatment and counseling options became available. Better Futures' MSW and the psychologists with which staff work now refer men to one of these providers.)