

# RURAL DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY WEBINAR SERIES

## Effective Reengagement and Recovery Programming in Rural Communities



### Youthbuild of Southeast Ohio McArthur, Ohio

#### WHERE IT'S HAPPENING

Located in Southeastern Ohio, Vinton County is the least populated, most rural county in the state. According to the 2010 census, the population is only around 13,500. The Appalachian culture is strong in this part of Ohio. Traditionally extraction industries, such as timber, were the mainstay of the economy, but the downturn in construction has affected these industries heavily. The county has been designated as a distressed county by the Appalachian Regional Commission.

#### WHY IT WAS STARTED

This Youthbuild program is run by Sojourners Care Network. Sojourners serves youth who have aged out of the foster care system. Twelve years ago, the organization decided they needed to move beyond providing housing or basic living income supports, so they obtained their first grant to run a Youthbuild program. After a number of years, the staff found the population they were serving was younger than previously, around age 18 at entry. Many of these students were disappointed that the program was only able to help them to obtain a GED and not a high school diploma. Five years ago the staff made the decision to offer a high school diploma option for students.

#### WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Youthbuild of Southeast Ohio has what they call an "Age Up" philosophy to help young people transition to healthy, independent young adulthood. The program focuses heavily on building leadership skills and contributing to the local community. Youth spend 50% of their time on academic work, 40% on job training, and 10% on leadership activities. Students work towards completion of a high school diploma or GED. Youth also receive job training in the construction trade, working to build affordable housing in the community. The program emphasizes making life and career plans. As one staff member put it, "It is amazing to work with students who know what they want and want to be here." After they graduate, staff continues to work with students to connect them to careers and postsecondary training. There are currently 300 Youthbuild programs across the country, a third of which operate in rural communities.

#### WHO IS SERVED

Students must be between the ages of 16 and 24. Most students served have dropped out of high school and are two years behind in grade level. They are lacking many basic academic skills. Of the 51 students served in the grant cycle that ended in December 2012, 90% were high school dropouts and 50 of 51 were categorized as basic skills deficient. Seventy-eight percent of the youth served in this grant cycle were from low-income families. The program often serves students from the foster care system who are already connected to Sojourners Care Network, as well as youth or adult offenders. To date the program has served approximately 275 students, and a new cohort of 29 just began the program in January 2013.

#### HOW IT WORKS

During each grant cycle the program can provide services to up to 50 youth over a two-year period. However, it usually only serves 20-30 students at any one time. Ideally students spend about a year in the program. Youth spend half of their time on academic preparation, working towards a high school diploma or studying to complete the GED. Approximately two thirds choose the diploma option, which is encouraged. On school days, 10-12 students meet together with their teacher and complete individual work online. Students working on a high school diploma use ACE Digital Academy, provided through the Vinton County School District, or a program designed by Virtual Community Schools of Ohio. Students set minimum daily goals for themselves and the teacher is available to answer questions and review their work. At the end of the day the class does activities together such as working through Ohio Graduation Test practice problems.

Forty percent of a student's time is spent in vocational training. Students work in the construction and carpentry trade. They learn workforce maturity and job success skills and complete at least one certification from the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER). The program works to mimic a real job scenario. Students must complete different requirements to receive "promotions" and progress through four roles from pledge to crew leader. The requirements stress responsibility and leadership. Once a student becomes an apprentice, which requires creation of a resume and an interview, he or she begins work on an active work-site and receives a living stipend for their labor.

Youthbuild emphasizes planning for the future. Students work with a counselor to develop life and career plans, including a required Individual Development Plan. Their classroom teacher helps put academic tasks in the context of life goals. In fact, all the staff build strong relationships with students focused on helping them articulate and achieve their goals. Youthbuild has built strong relationships with local colleges, including Hocking College and Rio Grande Community College. Students all participate in college visits and staff work hard to help students build the college knowledge needed to navigate the postsecondary application process.

After graduation, youth continue their relationship with Youthbuild during a 9-month after care period. During this time a partner organization, Job and Family Services, helps students with resume writing, interview training, and job hunting. Youthbuild staff members help students with college applications. Another partner, The Ohio Benefits Bank, helps students find living support, grants, and loans as they are transitioning to living on their own.

## HOW IT'S FUNDED

The program receives the majority of funding through grants from the U.S. Department of Labor through the Workforce Investment Act. The program also receives support from YouthBuild USA through their National Schools Initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In years when the program has not been fully funded by grants, Sojourners Care Network assumed fiscal responsibility to ensure program continuity.

## WHY IT WORKS FOR A RURAL COMMUNITY

This community is close knit. Partnership is seen as part of how rural communities operate. Youthbuild works with dozens of local organizations. Staffs know each other and work together well. Additionally, there are opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles. By working to build low-income housing and participating in other service projects students become known and respected in the community. Contributing helps the youth build responsibility and self esteem.

## CHALLENGES

- Transportation is an ongoing problem. When students first apply, staff challenges them to figure out how they will get to the training center, which can be a deciding factor in whether they can participate. Students and families are very resourceful. The program can provide a stipend for gas to help, and one staff member picks up a few students. Program staff also handle transportation from the training center to the job sites for work.
- Placement of students in jobs following the program continues to be a challenge. This rural region is economically distressed with few employers in the community. Currently more than half of the workforce leaves the county each day as there is not enough employment to sustain available workers. As a result, transportation can be a major barrier. To earn a living wage students often must travel to another community, but saving for a car takes time.
- In this community, extended families and small groups often live in isolated areas and develop strong bonds. This provides students with strong support. However, it can be difficult for youth to leave the community to go to college or earn higher paying jobs, as it is sometimes seen as abandoning the family.

## SUCSESSES

- Last program cycle, 40 of 51 youth completed the NCCER Core Curriculum and received a certificate.
- Twenty-two out of 46 eligible students from the last cohort received a HS diploma or GED before the end of the grant reporting cycle in December 2012. Many continue to work towards this goal during the after care.
- So far 47% from the cohort year that ended in December 2012 were placed in jobs or begun postsecondary training. More continue to work towards this goal with support through after care provided by the program.
- The program has strong relationships with postsecondary partners. They advocated for Rio Grande Community College to open a local branch, which occurred three years ago. This has allowed more students to access opportunities, as transportation was a major challenge. Eighty-four percent of students in the cycle that ended in 2012 participated in postsecondary exploration/planning activities. Twelve of 51 enrolled in postsecondary training.
- Staff report large numbers of former students regularly contacting the program for support in planning for their futures. They feel this is a testament to the quality of relationships and the value of Youthbuild in students' lives.