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Overview

In response to spikes in youth crime rates and concerns over throngs of youth gathering to 'hang out' –volatile settings known to escalate quickly into violence–the Saint Paul Mayor's Office and Police Department (SPPD) launched a powerful intervention initiative that literally 'met the youth where they were at' – on the streets. In June 2013, Community Ambassadors (i.e., youth workers hired specifically to provide street outreach services) were placed in targeted downtown St. Paul locations, evenings and on weekends, to engage and connect with the youth. In just three months, the Ambassadors connected and interacted with 236 young people–working to build relationships with the youth, collecting demographic information and learning about the barriers that could lead them to problem behaviors. Hiring experienced, culturally-specific outreach workers–many of them were from the community and known by the youth–enabled the Ambassadors to successfully, verbally deescalate situations that might otherwise have spiraled into violence. Youth arrests in the targeted areas dropped an average of 40%.

These impressive results led to the expansion of the Initiative in June 2014 to a year-round, city-wide model. The Community Ambassadors Initiative (CAI) blended street outreach and engagement services with skill-building programming and services (e.g., employment, life skills, education support, tattoo removal and more) delivered by partnering community organizations. Service impact is measured via data related to juvenile arrests and incidents of youth-led violence provided by the SPPD and information provided by community representatives (e.g., civic leaders, faith community, businesses, etc.).

Building on Success

CAI uses intervention strategies guided by best practices to decrease involvement in the criminal justice system and provides meaningful supports to traditionally hard-to-reach youth. Despite being in operation for less than three years, CAI has earned the respect of community stakeholders for quality services and impressive results.

Services to Hard-to-Reach Youth.

- The lives of over 3,500 youth were touched by this promising initiative in its first 17 months of operation. Between June 2014 and March 2015 alone, the Ambassadors engaged and/or referred 1,940 at-risk youth to community partners for programming and services.
- Over 75 youth acquired new skills, confidence and positive community connections via summer employment provided through Right Track, a program of the City of Saint Paul. Ten percent of these youth were hired by their employers at the conclusion of the summer program.

Supporting Safe, Healthy Communities.

- Juvenile Arrests decrease by 63% when the Ambassadors were working in targeted areas throughout the City of Saint Paul.
- The Ambassadors have played a key role working with youth present at multiple events across Saint Paul including St. Paul Police Safe Summer Nights, Rondo Days, and Cinco de Mayo.

Aligning Services to Meet Community Need.

- Youthprise, fiscal sponsor for CAI, has been a partner since 2014. Youthprise has agreed to continue for a third year with leveraging dollars starting in 2016.
- The number of Ambassadors has grown from 18 (2013) to more than 30; over 90% of the original Ambassadors remain with the Initiative.
- With a contract with Metro Transit Police (September 2015), the Ambassadors are helping Metro Transit Police manage increased ridership resulting from Johnson High School's decision to issue students bus passes.

Earning Broad Based Community Support.

- “The Community Ambassadors have become a tremendous asset for the City of Saint Paul. They connect to youth who are at risk of causing or getting into trouble and refer them to community resources. The relatively low crime rate in downtown Saint Paul can be directly attributed to the Ambassadors’ presence.”

Chris Coleman, Mayor of Saint Paul

- “The initiative makes a tangible difference for our city, our neighborhoods and our youth. It reduces crime and violence, but perhaps most importantly, it empowers young people with connections and tools they can use to stay on positive paths, find jobs, attend college and achieve their goals. The accomplishments of the Initiative are due to the willingness of the Mayor’s Office, the police department and community leaders to meet youth where they are—on the streets—and help them find and forge paths to brighter futures.”

Todd Axtell, Saint Paul Chief of Police

- “The news is full of examples of strained relationships and encounters between police and communities across our country, and better approaches are needed. I’ve been proud to share with many colleagues across the nation the impressive results of our Community Ambassadors Initiative – a 63 percent reduction in juvenile arrests when Ambassadors are on the street – and they are eager to create similar initiatives. But as important as keeping young people out of the criminal justice system, the power of this proactive effort comes from the many partners who step forward to give youth productive alternatives.”

Tom Smith, Former Saint Paul Chief of Police and
Co-Founder of the Community Ambassadors Initiative

- “The Ambassadors Initiative has had a positive impact on downtown St. Paul. Their success reducing the juvenile crime rate in St. Paul is noteworthy. The Ambassadors Initiative is an asset to the city and to ensure its ongoing success, BOMA organized a fundraising event in the fall of 2016 to support this great Initiative. In addition, BOMA is interested in working with its membership to identify entry level employment opportunities for the youth referred through the Ambassadors.”

Joe Spartz, President, Greater St. Paul BOMA
Julie Bauch, Chair, BOMA Board of Directors

- “The Ambassadors are an essential part of our community policing efforts - together we are preventing crime and keeping the peace.”

John Harrington, Chief, Metro Transit Police

Contact Information

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