

A CIRCLE OF CARING:
How One Community Volunteered to Help
Teens in Trouble with Drugs, Alcohol
and Crime

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Abstract

Reclaiming Futures, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is designed to improve substance abuse interventions for youthful offenders, in part by involving community members in their lives as positive role models and mentors. This monograph introduces the reader to the “natural helper” program developed by the Reclaiming Futures initiative in Montgomery County, Ohio, and what it has done to successfully involve the faith community with teens in trouble with drugs, alcohol, and crime. The program’s philosophy, design, and administration are covered in detail; and copies of key documents are included, along with the personal stories of participants. Also attached are capsule summaries of the approaches taken by the other nine Reclaiming Futures pilot sites to involve community members as “natural helpers” and mentors.

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Mommy, Why?

—A poem by a young person in the Montgomery County Natural Helpers program.

*Mommy, why did you do the drugs
The drugs that lead to my premature birth*

Why didn't you choose health over your addiction?

Why couldn't you hold off for the few nine months?

*The drugs and alcohol in the first trimester weren't
enough. You had to drag it on to the second and
the third*

*Mommy, why did you leave me for Grandma to take
care of me once you had me drugged to the point
where I shook and cried from the withdrawal of
drugs you put into my body*

*I was your blessing that you turned into a sad
tragedy*

*After two months in an incubator, I would not eat or even
function right without the machine. I had problems
that the doctors were certain couldn't be fixed*

But by the grace of God I am here and able to ask you

Mommy, Why?

Section 1: Introduction—The Role of the Community in the Reclaiming Futures Model

Ten Jurisdictions, Ten Ways to Involve the Community

Every teen is different. So is every community. In this monograph, you will learn how officials in Montgomery County Ohio, convinced 99 ordinary people, most of them churchgoers, to step forward and mentor 95 youth in the justice system who had alcohol and drug problems.

As you will see, the secret to Montgomery County-Reclaiming Futures' success was that it capitalized on the strengths of its young people and its community. Among other things, local leaders made a strategic decision to recruit “natural helpers” (mentors) for young people in the justice system from the faith community. Given that nearly 57% of youth adjudicated in Montgomery County as delinquents in 2006 were African American,¹ and given the deep roots of the church in their community, this made a great deal of sense.

Montgomery County's success has been remarkable, and offers lessons for any jurisdiction wishing to learn more about how to involve ordinary people in the lives of troubled teens. Therefore, this monograph is devoted to the philosophy and structure of the Montgomery County Natural Helpers program. Also included are some thoughts on how to replicate their effort, and challenges likely to be faced by jurisdictions wishing to emulate their example. (Though it is not intended to be a step-by-step manual for setting up a mentoring program, as many fine resources for that already exist, some nuts-and-bolts materials related to program operation are contained in the appendices.)

But each of the other nine Reclaiming Futures pilot sites came up with its own approach to involving community members in the lives of teens in trouble with drugs, alcohol, and the law. You can read capsule summaries of their efforts in Table 1.

The Community's Role in the Reclaiming Futures Model

When The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) funded the Reclaiming Futures initiative, it underwrote an ambitious effort to change the way the juvenile justice system handled youth with drug and alcohol problems. But it also did something unusual: it sought to change how ordinary citizens worked with these youth.

The foundation understood that when young people's futures are left to “the system,” they're more likely to stay in the system. Their futures cannot be reclaimed solely by the courts, juvenile probation, alcohol and drug treatment agencies, mental health providers, the schools, or child welfare. They also need outside help—from their relatives, friends, and neighbors. Even strangers can be effective mentors.

The power of caring adults outside the system to influence young people is often much greater than that of the professionals inside the system, no matter how sincere and well-meaning. Community members don't keep regular business hours, for one thing, so they're the ones young

¹ Ohio Department of Youth Services. Website. *Montgomery County-2006 Adjudications and Commitments*. <http://www.dys.ohio.gov/dysweb/statistics/Montgomery.aspx>.

people call when the professionals have gone home for the weekend. That’s why the first three steps of the Reclaiming Futures model fall under the label, “coordinated individualized response,” and the last three steps fall under “community directed engagement”.

An “individualized response” means that youth served by the Reclaiming Futures model do not simply receive a cookie-cutter plan, but one that has been designed specifically for them, with explicit attention paid to positive activities they can do and positive people they can be with. The youth’s plan is “coordinated” when it’s designed by a cross-agency team and driven, where possible, by the youth and his or her family. Professional input is necessary and important, but balance is required, since family members often have the most insight into what will work for them and their teen. And the sooner the youth is connected to the community—through activities like sports, music, church, or volunteering—the better.

As youth enter engage in treatment and other services designed for them (steps four through six of the Reclaiming Futures model), the community should play an ever-greater role. Hence, “community directed engagement” is used to describe the final three steps of the model. During this period of their care, youth should be connected to positive activities and role models at the same time they receive clinical services. This is where natural helpers begin to play a key role. At roughly the same time, youth involvement with juvenile court should be coming to a close. Shortly after completing treatment and other services in their individualized plans, youth should be able to remain in the community, living sober, crime-free, lives.

The idea is not new. Juvenile justice professionals have long understood that they can’t fix kids on their own. But connecting teens to the community—finding something for them to do, and somebody to do it with—has largely been left to individual probation officers and treatment counselors, all of whom have a long list of other priorities that are often easier to accomplish.

Without a systematic effort to actively recruit programs and people from the community to work with troubled teens, it often doesn’t happen or is poorly executed. The Reclaiming Futures model helps jurisdictions build new bridges to the community, and to institutionalize these connections as a normal part of doing business. Implemented correctly, the model creates lasting support for community involvement at every organizational level of the courts, probation, and treatment agencies. In its turn, the community will become better educated about youth in the justice system, and better prepared to advocate for them whenever necessary.

Laura Burney Nissen, Ph.D.
Reclaiming Futures National Program Director

[insert model graphic]

Table 1
How Nine Other Reclaiming Futures Sites Engaged the Community

State or Tribe	Jurisdiction	Community Focus
Alaska	Anchorage	Began formal tracking of youth connections to natural helpers and pro-social activities. Worked with local Mentoring Alliance to recruit mentors and natural helpers, and systematically solicited the support of local businesses and organizations to help develop pro-social opportunities for youth. Developed tiered approach to allow natural helpers to choose their level of involvement.
California	Santa Cruz County	Natural helpers are drawn from families taking part in Cara y Corazon, a family-strengthening curriculum. In addition, community volunteers present weekly hands-on workshops for youth on vocational, recreational, and educational topics. The goal is to spark an interest-based relationship between youth and the presenting volunteer, thus creating a true natural helping relationship.
Illinois	Cook County	Community members are engaged in everything from planning to mentoring. In particular, a “non-system,” supportive individual identified by the family takes part in the youth’s wraparound case planning team. If no one can be identified, youth meet weekly in groups of three with a mentor from the probation department for structured activities.
Kentucky	Southeastern Kentucky	Eastern Kentucky resists formal mentoring relationships, so a culturally appropriate alternative was found. Community members are more comfortable serving as “positive adults” by sponsoring activities, providing supervision and interaction with the youth, and supporting them as they develop their leadership skills. Positive adults are now identified in each youth’s individual service plan.
Michigan	Marquette County	Mentors are recruited and trained by a task force comprised of three mentoring agencies and several youth-serving organizations. A partnership with local business leaders allows youth in alternative education to meet with a job coach and receive on-the-job experience. A different project pairs youth in the

		justice system with Native American elders planting wild rice in inland lakes: a unique cultural and service-centered opportunity.
New Hampshire	State of New Hampshire	All four project sites made progress. In one, college students serve as natural helpers to youth in drug court—for credit. A restaurant owner helped youth develop and operate two summer businesses. Elsewhere, a new program connects youth with professionals to explore career or vocational interests. Other communities maintain informal networks that support youth with employment, community service & volunteering, recreation, and incentives.
Oregon	Portland, Multnomah County	Agreements were struck with local mentor organizations to give priority to teens in the justice system when making mentor matches. In return, Reclaiming Futures created a PR campaign to recruit mentors called “When You Were 15,” publishing an anthology of stories from prominent Portland-area citizens about how adults helped them when they were teens.
Sovereign Tribal Nation of Sicangu Lakota	Rosebud, South Dakota	Classic mentoring presented challenges in terms of transportation and costly background checks. So the project identified elders who’d already passed background checks because they already worked with youth, and invited them to make presentations at the weekly Youth Wellness Court. This helps youth build a social network they can connect with according to their needs.
Washington	Seattle, King County	The 4C Coalition Mentor Program recruits, screens and trains adults from diverse cultural backgrounds to serve as mentors to youth in the local juvenile justice system.

Section 2: “START WITH PEOPLE’S GIFTS”

Communities have a distorted view of young people in the juvenile justice system and they have a distorted view of what should be done with them. Despite the fact that a large majority of young people in the system are not violent and are not a threat to society, they are perceived as such. When John DiIulio coined the term “superpredators” for our young people in 1996², he gave all young people in the juvenile justice system an unfortunate label that would discourage anyone in their communities from accepting responsibility for them.

These young people are often perceived by society to be young people without assets, gifts or talents. In years of research with young people, it has been found that all young people, no matter what their circumstances or challenges, have gifts and talents to build upon and to share with others. The typical juvenile delinquent who has been convicted of a crime may have little support at home, may have witnessed acts of violence and may have been a victim of physical or sexual abuse. This same young person may have various gifts, such as artistic or musical talent, may attend church regularly with his/her grandparent or may have a supportive adult or youth friend who cares about him – all gifts that if recognized and mobilized, could lead him or her to a turnaround and a productive life.

If communities are to accept responsibility for their young people, it is crucial for the people who work with them to recognize that they have gifts and to use methods that identify, enhance and mobilize those gifts.

In Montgomery County, Ohio there is a special program that involves the community in the solution. It is called the Reclaiming Futures Natural Helper program. It recruits, interviews and matches adult Natural Helpers with young people involved in juvenile drug court who may not have supportive and appropriate adults in their lives.

The approach utilized by the Reclaiming Futures project is based on building on the assets of youth, adults, Natural Helpers and juvenile justice and treatment professionals. That is, the gifts of young people are matched with the gifts of caring adult Natural Helpers to provide a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on and someone to hang with. These are often young people who have no one to support them during a court appearance; they often go home to addicted and abusive parents; and they don’t often have people just to do everyday life with – shop, go to church, talk to, decorate a Christmas tree, prepare a meal, visit a college, or run errands. They are isolated from what most of us have come to regard as normal: the Natural Helper is there to provide real “caring” in a “normal” setting.

² John DiIulio and others, State of Violent Crime in America, Council on Crime in America, 1996. In this writing and several others in the mid 1990’s, John DiIulio coined the term “juvenile superpredators” to describe young people in America. Despite the fact that the vast majority of young people in the justice system are not extremely violent, the term stuck and caused a rash of extremely punitive legislation, which served to reduce the rehabilitative focus of the juvenile court.