

# River City YouthBuild

## The Impact of Mentoring

### Background

The River City YouthBuild-AmeriCorps Program in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, provides economically disadvantaged youth with on-site housing construction and rehabilitation work experience and on-site academic classes, job skills training, leadership development, community service, and supportive services. A 2011 United States Department of Labor YouthBuild grant recipient, River City YouthBuild serves an average of 30 low-income youth in the northeastern North Carolina each year. Participants range in age from 16 to 24 and have left high school without a diploma. In addition to benefiting the youth participants, the program also increases the supply of permanent, affordable housing for homeless and low-income families.

River City YouthBuild is embedded within the River City Community Development Corporation (RCCDC), whose mission is to strengthen communities and improve the quality of life for residents in Elizabeth City and northeastern North Carolina. Led by President-CEO Lenora Jarvis-Mackey, RCCDC was founded in 1990 and is dedicated to providing strong leadership through the implementation of programs and initiatives that provide affordable housing, economic and workforce development, health and wellness services, cultural awareness, and youth empowerment.

In 2010, River City YouthBuild applied for and received funding to start a formal mentoring program through a YouthBuild USA subgrant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). Historically, informal mentoring was a part of their program model, but the OJJDP grant made it possible to recruit and train qualified volunteers, match mentors with students under the age of 18<sup>1</sup>, monitor and track the relationships, and ensure quality and follow-through for

1. The OJJDP National Mentoring Grant provides funding for mentoring services for youth under the age of 18.

the participants. Since many of the young people who come to the program did not have strong support systems at home, the staff hoped the more formal and structured approach to mentoring would ensure a go-to person for the youth who most needed it.

### The Program's Challenge

When River City YouthBuild got the news of the grant, they hired a new staff person with mentoring experience and enthusiasm for working with at-risk youth. This new employee recruited college-age students as mentors from a local university who had great energy, talent, and commitment to the coordinator. When he left after the first year, however, most of the mentors left as well, since their bond was with the coordinator and not as much with the program or the mentees.

**Rather than looking at mentors as “filling a slot,” River City YouthBuild took the view that each mentor was an important stakeholder in the program and in the lives of the youth with whom they were partnered.**

The program staff and leadership had to regroup quickly as the next class of students and next cohort of mentees was coming on board. They needed to rethink their entire approach to recruiting mentors.

River City leadership stepped back and refocused on how mentoring can and should be integrated into their entire program. With a foundational belief that mentoring can have a direct impact on a young person's future while strengthening the fabric of the community, they changed their target efforts, becoming much more selective in the type of mentors they were looking for, and recruiting more experienced adult professionals and community leaders. Rather than looking at mentors as “filling a slot,” they took the view that each

mentor was an important stakeholder in the program and in the lives of the youth with whom they were partnered. They began to see the mentoring pairs as important building blocks in strengthening the community, and the mentors themselves as champions within the community for the program.

## The Mentoring Initiative

This new view and approach changed everything. Over the course of the following two years, they saw a dramatic increase in support, advocacy, and champions at leadership levels throughout the community.

**Once matched, mentors frequently visited students at the program for academic support and also off-site for lunch, campus tours, and other supportive and engaging activities.**

The integration of mentoring into all programmatic elements of the program began with a youth-oriented approach to recruitment, screening, and matching. Through the use of a social gathering, all students who wished to have a mentor participated in a fun activity with

potential mentor candidates. Everyone had the opportunity to interact, allowing for time to see if there were natural connections of personalities and interests that could lead to good potential matches.

Once matched, mentors frequently visited students at the program for academic support and also met off-site for lunch, campus tours, and other supportive and engaging activities. The minimum expectation is that they would meet four hours a month, but this was frequently exceeded. At the beginning of their YouthBuild tenure, students completed individual development plans (IDPs) and shared them with mentors. These IDPs indicate what their career goals are at the early stages, which also helps in the matching process. For example, one student who wanted to be a nurse was matched up with a local physician (they have since passed their 15-month commitment mark, play golf regularly, and have established what is likely to be a lifelong commitment).

Mentors also served as field-trip chaperones, participated in group mentoring activities, and even served as ushers at the most recent graduation ceremony. In these and many other ways, mentors provided the support needed for the youth to transition into positive and productive adulthoods within the community and beyond.

As Angie Wills, program manager, explained, “Mentoring is a team approach, where the team is the community and we work with a variety of folks in the community. Everyone is always recruiting as far as mentoring, [thinking about] who can add value to program... We have been fortunate to engage a lot of leaders in the mentoring program, including the mayor, professors, and the chief of police.”

For example, Ms. Wills told the story of a writer at a local newspaper who is a mentor. He opened up opportunities to get information out about mentoring and highlighting YouthBuild in local news. This reporter was ideally positioned to speak to the story as one who is actually engaged in group meetings and various activities, making a big difference in terms of local awareness for River City YouthBuild.

There were challenges, however, even with the new slate of mentors. All of the mentors were committed to working with at-risk youth, but many were not prepared for the reality of working with young people who had been let down so many times before. In some cases, because of basic trust issues, students failed to return calls or text messages, and made up excuses not to meet for lunch. In response, River City staff created the mentoring alliance, a monthly support group for mentors to get together and talk about challenges, give updates, share what works and what doesn't work, and generally support each other. They found that this helped tremendously. For some alliance meetings, students would attend and talk to the group about what were eye-openers for them, or staff would sit in and share some news about what was happening at the program that the mentors might not be aware of.

## Results

The biggest and most important impact of mentoring, by far, has been the impact on the youth in the program. This is seen clearly when looking at program completion, GED attainment, and placement (job and postsecondary education) goals, as is clearly shown in figures A and B.

FIGURE A

### All River City YouthBuild students, before and after introduction of formal mentoring

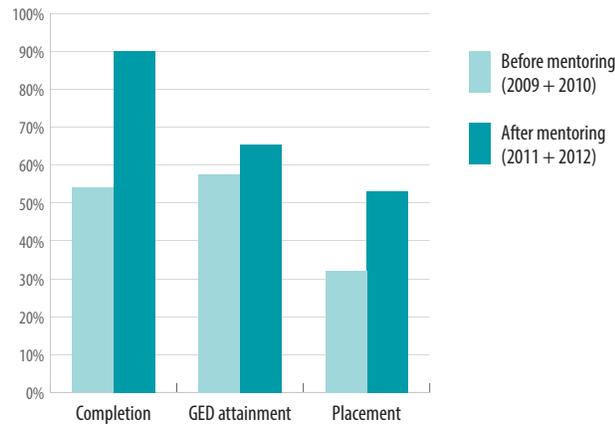


FIGURE B

### 2011–2012 (post-mentoring) outcomes, comparing outcomes for students not in mentoring program with those in mentoring

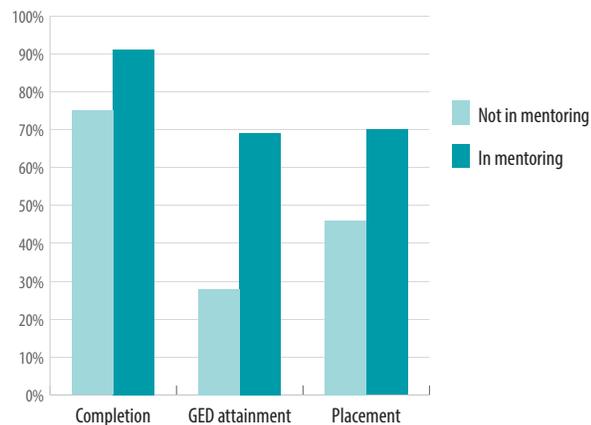


Figure A shows a significant overall increase in outcomes from before to after the formal mentoring program was underway. Figure B shows the difference in outcomes between mentored and non-mentored students, with mentored students significantly outperforming non-mentored students across all outcome

areas, even though the non-mentored students were generally the older and more mature and experienced students.<sup>2</sup>

These outcomes clearly attest to the positive impact of these formal mentoring relationships on the young people. Lenora Jarvis-Mackey, president-CEO of RCCDC, states, “Knowing there is someone else outside of the YouthBuild walls, calling, holding them accountable, staying in touch, makes all the difference.”

The community partnerships the program has recently established can be tied directly back to the types of mentors that are recruited and the team approach they take with these mentors.

But the story goes much further. The community partnerships the program has recently established can be tied directly back to the types of mentors that are recruited and the team approach they take with these mentors. This has opened up a whole new network that wouldn't have been possible otherwise. For example, because the chief of police is a mentor, a partnership has been established with the police department (also an OJJDP subgrantee through the National Association of Police Athletic/Activities League, Inc.), providing further resources and additional mentors (other police officers). This is an especially meaningful partnership, as YouthBuild students are frequently wary of authority figures, particularly those in law-enforcement. Having the full support and partnership of the police in their corner is helping to heal a history of tensions and strengthen the fabric of their community in real and meaningful ways.

2. The data drawn for this case study included 16- and 17-year-old students that were being formally mentored as part of the OJJDP-funded mentoring initiative. All students in this initiative were required to be under the age of eighteen at the time they began the program. With very few exceptions, all students who had the opportunity to participate, did so. Some of the older students in the River City program also had informal (“natural”) mentors, but they were not part of the formal program and therefore were not recorded as having participated in the mentoring program for purposes of this study.

**River City YouthBuild's biggest goal now is to ensure that all of their students—not just the ones under 18—have the opportunity to be matched with an adult mentor that is trained and supported through their program.**

are effective advocates for youth as they transition out of the program and begin to explore job, career, and further educational opportunities.

Because River City was able to show such strong results from this grant, they were also able to apply for and receive further pass-through funding from

Their rebooted mentor recruitment strategy is paying further dividends, as the well-connected professional mentors now do much of the recruitment of new mentors for them, freeing up the mentor coordination time to focus more on ongoing support of the relationships. Because of their positions in the community, these mentors also

YouthBuild USA under the AmeriCorps grant. Their biggest goal now is to ensure that all of their students—not just the ones under 18—have the opportunity to be matched with an adult mentor that is trained and supported through their program. As their current mentors continue to serve as ambassadors for YouthBuild and advocates for their young people, they are optimistic for the future of mentoring in River City, and the future of their community.

In the final assessment, it all comes down to the commitment to the youth in the community. As Ms. Wills states, “It’s the support system—the staff can’t do it all. When they go back to the same environment, there has to be someone in their lives that will hold them accountable and call them on weekends... There’s not enough hope in their lives. Knowing there is someone else outside of staff that cares—that makes all the difference.”