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Public/Private Ventures' Evaluation of Faith-Based Programs

by Nels Ericson

Traditional public and nonprofit youth programs often do not reach many of the highest risk juveniles in poor communities. In many of these neighborhoods few, if any, such programs even exist. To fill this void, well-established churches and other faith-based institutions often serve these vulnerable juveniles and their families through "outreach ministries" that provide social, educational, and employment services. However, little is known about how far these faith-based activities reach into the community, their effectiveness, and whether these programs can be expanded to serve more juveniles.

In August 1997, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) of Philadelphia, PA, surveyed religious leaders whose congregations and organizations offered services to high-risk juveniles in order to discover how faith-based institutions implement these programs. With funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), P/PV established a national multisite demonstration and research initiative in 1998 to involve faith-based institutions as the anchoring organizations within local partnerships that included law enforcement, juvenile justice agencies, foundations and philanthropies, local government, and other community organizations. The partnerships were designed to address the developmental needs of high-risk juveniles through three primary functions: (1) decreasing involvement with crime and drugs, (2) improving educational achievement, and (3) helping prepare youth for productive employment.

The P/PV demonstration project hopes to replicate the success of Boston's Ten Point Coalition, a group of congregations that partnered with the criminal justice and law enforcement communities and social service agencies in 1992 to address juvenile violence in that city. As a result of this partnership, juvenile crime in Boston has declined, and more attention is being paid to other youth development strategies. Some of the P/PV sites seek to replicate the Ten Point Coalition program; other sites have developed programs that use elements of the Ten Point program; and still other sites are seeking to expand existing local programs that focus on youth involved with the juvenile justice system, girls in trouble with the law, youth in need of mentoring services, and other at-risk youth.

Public/Private Ventures

P/PV is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the effectiveness of social policies, programs, and community initiatives, especially those that affect juveniles and young adults. P/PV works with philanthropies, the public and business sectors, and nonprofit organizations in the following ways:

- ◆ Developing or identifying social policies, strategies, and practices that promote individual economic success, citizenship, and stronger families and communities.
- ◆ Assessing the effectiveness of promising approaches and distilling their critical elements and benchmarks, using rigorous field study and research methods.
- ◆ Mining evaluation results and implementation experiences for their policy and practice implications, and communicating the findings to public and private decisionmakers and community leaders.
- ◆ Creating and field testing the building blocks—model policies, financing approaches, curriculums and training materials, communication strategies, and learning processes—needed to implement effective approaches more broadly.

P/PV then works with leaders of the various sectors to implement these expansion tools and to improve their usefulness.

P/PV's staff is composed of policy leaders in various fields, evaluators and researchers in disciplines ranging from economics to ethnography, and experienced practitioners from the nonprofit, public, business, and philanthropic sectors.

The Demonstration Project

During the summer of 1998, organizations with youth-serving programs were invited to submit applications to participate in P/PV's demonstration; in January 1999, 10 sites were selected to implement the project. The sites varied in size, religious and theological orientation, geographical location (inner-city, suburban, and working class neighborhoods), and program strategy,

but all focused on at-risk juveniles in their communities. During the next year, the sites prepared strategic plans and monthly work plans that detailed specific activities, staff/volunteer responsibilities, and expected outcomes. Where possible, sites were encouraged to implement programs. At the end of the first year, P/PV conducted an assessment of each site's strategic plan, program activities, fulfillment of goals, and program viability.

Since June 2000, OJJDP has funded the development and implementation of the sites' strategic plans with \$2.5 million in grants. P/PV works with the individual sites to develop their budgetary and financial reporting systems, reviews all submitted financial reports, and conducts confidential system and financial audits on selected sites.

P/PV also provides technical assistance designed to help sites address deficiencies in their strategic plans, budget, staffing collaborations, proposal writing, staff development, board development, volunteer training, legal/contractual documentation, and evaluation. In the future, P/PV will focus technical assistance efforts to help sites:

- ◆ Strengthen the relationship between faith-based institutions, law enforcement, and juvenile justice agencies through cross-site conferences and skills building.
- ◆ Develop revenue streams to ensure sustainability once Federal funding ends.
- ◆ Conduct evaluations to determine each program's effectiveness, gather data on how programs vary from one site to another, and develop hypotheses on the local policy implications of each program.

P/PV research on the sites will focus on the faith-based organizations' ability to form strategic partnerships, leverage and manage resources, build community support, actively involve congregants in supporting juveniles, and develop and implement sound program strategies and services that engage the most seriously at-risk juveniles. P/PV will also examine the role of faith in service delivery, the extent of faith-based organizations' reach into the community, and the impact of the initiative on juveniles and their communities.

Early Findings

Early assessment of the demonstration sites has shown that there is no simple model of how best to build an effective faith-based program to reach at-risk juveniles. Rather, there are three discernible steps that successful programs seem to follow: (1) build relationships with juveniles, (2) draw the juveniles into available programs and services, and (3) connect the juveniles to appropriate resources.

The assessment also shows the following about faith-based programs:

- ◆ They generally appear to be open to exploring partnerships with other groups.
- ◆ Their weaknesses include inadequate personnel policies, hiring practices, fiscal management, and fund-raising capacities; a general lack of program knowledge; and uncertainty as to how to communicate with the secular world.
- ◆ They tend to avoid proselytizing. Instead, they demonstrate their beliefs through their support of the juveniles and their programs and the community they serve. Their credibility with the community and other sectors is high.

For Further Information

To find out more about Public/Private Ventures and the Partnerships for High-Risk Youth Program, contact Public/Private Ventures, One Commerce Square, 2005 Market Street, Suite 900, Philadelphia, PA 19103, call 215-557-4400, fax 215-557-4469, or visit the Web site at www.ppv.org.

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The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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