

CHALLENGE #7:

PROVIDE QUALITY EDUCATION AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT SERVICES THAT ENABLE YOUTH TO ASSUME PRODUCTIVE ROLES IN SOCIETY

“For too long, education has been regarded as just another service for incarcerated youth. For too long, yesterday’s pedagogy has failed to educate delinquent youth for today’s world. It is time to change.”⁴⁸

Robert Gemignani, National Office for Social Responsibility

Overwhelmingly, young people who become chronic delinquents and adult criminals suffer from two crippling problems: 1) weak academic achievement; and 2) poor preparation for the world of work.

If we want to hasten the pace at which delinquent youth mature into adulthood and terminate delinquent behavior patterns (as most eventually do), helping youth prepare for and enter the labor market is critical. That means education. That means job readiness. That means vocational skills. And for troubled youth long used to failure, many of whom suffer learning disabilities and behavioral disorders, each of these goals requires hands-on learning opportunities providing both a first taste of success and a clear path toward employment.

Nationwide, detailed information about the scope and quality of education and training programs for delinquent youth is virtually non-existent. The latest national survey of juvenile correctional education programs was completed in 1996 (using data from 1992), and it included little more than an incomplete checklist from 39 states. The report listed state budgets for juvenile correctional education, the agency responsible for administering correctional education programs, and simple yes-no lists of program types offered (elementary & secondary education, GED prep, vocational education, etc.). The report included few data regarding how many youth participate in these programs, and no data at all on participant outcomes.⁴⁹

As one federally-funded study concluded, “No systematic and cumulative data exist to show what programs [youthful offenders] receive, from what kinds of staff, at what cost – let alone what results.”⁵⁰

Even without national data, however, it is clear that most juvenile justice systems remain substantially unprepared to provide delinquent youth with a quality education and prepare them for the labor market. According to the National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice: “Education programs in many juvenile correctional facilities are inadequate.... Juvenile correctional institutions often have limited capacity to support appropriate educational interventions for the youth confined to their care and custody. Major systemic impediments include overcrowding, insufficient financial resources, ineffective governance structures, isolation of correctional schools from education reform practices and from public schools, inadequate transition and aftercare services, and lack of collaboration and coordination with treatment and security components within the juvenile facility.”⁵¹

Particularly serious in juvenile corrections is the lack of career preparation. The majority of youth who are removed from home and placed in juvenile corrections facilities never again return to school – and most never complete high school. “While correctional educators must find better ways to motivate students to return to school,” writes

correctional education expert, Robert Gemignani, “they must also provide students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed in entry-level jobs.”⁵²

“The relationship [between youth and correctional staff] and a sense of safety are the absolute, necessary fundamental things that have to be in

place” in juvenile corrections,” explains juvenile justice consultant, Paul DeMuro. “Once they are in place, you can step back and look at what causes the delinquency in the first place, and I think in most cases that is lack of opportunity. So if that’s the cause, then skills enhancing is clearly an important part of the solution.”

PREPARING DELINQUENT YOUTH FOR PRODUCTIVE CAREERS THE GULF COAST TRAINING CENTER

In New Waverly, Texas, a new neighborhood is sprouting up – eight houses purchased since 1998 by moderate income families at affordable prices, and five more on the drawing board. With wall-to-wall carpeting, modern kitchens and central heating, the homes look conventional in every respect. But in one way they are entirely unique: all were primarily built by delinquent juvenile offenders.

The development and construction of these homes has been spearheaded by the Gulf Coast Trades Center, a juvenile corrections program located in the Sam Houston National Forest outside of New Waverly, an hour’s ride north of Houston. By teaching youthful offenders practical, hands-on vocational skills (in construction and several other career tracks) and providing opportunities to employ those skills in a real world context, Gulf Coast Trades Center stands virtually alone in our nation’s juvenile justice infrastructure – a residential program for serious juvenile offenders that makes education and career preparation the cornerstone of its treatment and rehabilitation philosophy.

Not only for new homeowners, but also for the young

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people served and Texas citizens concerned about youth crime, the results of Gulf Coast’s vocational approach are noteworthy: low recidivism and high rates of success for program graduates in finding well-paying employment in their chosen occupations.

UNION ROOTS

Gulf Coast Trades Center came to life in 1971 on the grounds of an abandoned site of the federal Job Corps program. The Gulf Coast Trades Union, in partnership with city government in Houston, secured funding from the federal Model Cities program to continue using the site to train low-income youths. The new program struggled until former union organizer Mike Buzbee took over in 1974. Though Buzbee and five staff members went without pay for three months in these early days, Gulf Coast captured contracts with the Texas Youth Commission and the federal CETA job training program early in 1975 and began training delinquent teens for trades and careers.

A quarter century later, Buzbee remains in charge at Gulf Coast, and the agency retains its union-based focus on trades and careers. Gulf Coast provides academic and vocational training, work experience, counseling and aftercare for 176 delinquent youth each day. Sixty percent of these youth are referred from the Texas Youth Commission (TYC) – either as a step down from their initial stays in TYC training schools, a consequence for violating parole, or as a direct placement following adjudication. The remaining 40 percent are referred to Gulf Coast directly from county courts and probation agencies throughout Texas.

FRESH START at the Living Classrooms Foundation: An Old Trade Leads to New Success

Down on the waterfront in Baltimore's Fells Point neighborhood, once home to a thriving shipbuilding industry, 20 young men arrive each morning to learn that honored old trade. Five days per week for 40 weeks, they practice boatbuilding, carpentry and other hands-on skills. They also receive valuable job readiness training, advance academically, and learn self-discipline with the help of an innovative daily self-evaluation process. By the time they graduate from this "Fresh Start" program, most of the youth – all juvenile offenders ages 16 to 21 – are ready to succeed in employment and/or education. Even more importantly, unlike youth confined in Maryland's more conventional juvenile corrections programs, they are unlikely ever to be rearrested or reincarcerated.

"Fresh Start" was launched in 1989 by the Living Classrooms Foundation, a Baltimore-based nonprofit dedicated to youth development through hands-on learning. Funded primarily by the Maryland Department of Juvenile Justice, the program serves 20 youth at a time in a curriculum with five eight-week modules. All participants are referred by a probation officer or a juvenile court judge. More than half reside at the Maryland Youth Residence Center, a locked facility, while the remainder reside either in state-funded group homes (about one-fourth) or in their own family homes.

Because Fresh Start is voluntary and uses no locks or restraints, the program operates with a strict behavioral code: youth who commit or threaten violence, and those found with or under the influence of drugs, are automatically expelled. Also, youth are allowed three personal days during each eight-week cycle. Absence counts as one personal day, and any lateness counts for half a day. If they exceed the three-day limit, youth are removed from the program and must apply for re-admission. As a result, Fresh Start has a daily attendance rate of more than 90 percent.

Although Fresh Start participants spend only 75 minutes per day in a classroom, most make substantial academic progress thanks to the program's extensive hands-on learning activities. Youth gain an average of 1.85 grades in reading, 1.0 grades in writing, and .65 grades in math. Of those who enter the program at an 8th grade level or higher, 77 percent earn their GEDs. Fresh Start youth also earn

The main 46-acre Gulf Coast campus – which has no perimeter fence and uses no locked cells or physical restraints – houses 144 youth in six dormitories. Another 32 participants – mostly older youth who are unlikely to return to their family homes – reside on an independent living campus.⁵³ All participants are between the ages of 16 and 18, and 80 percent are male. One-fifth of participants are white, while African American and Hispanic youths each comprise about two-fifths of the Gulf Coast population.

VOCATIONAL CORRECTIONS

The Gulf Coast program offers a strong dose of academic education. Participants spend two hours every day in Gulf Coast's Learning Resource Center where they work on basic skills, study for the GED, or earn high school credits with the help of a 20-

station computer lab, as well as videos, workbooks, and individual tutoring from the Center's academic instructors. Students work at their own pace, using individualized plans developed and updated by staff based on extensive pre-testing and ongoing assessments.

These academic activities (as well as the vocational training described below) are overseen entirely by Gulf Coast, which established an independent charter school in 1998 after struggling to partner with local school districts throughout the prior two decades. With the charter school, Gulf Coast is now free to hire its own instructors, set its own hours, and establish its own curriculum – rather than trying to fit its program into the regulations and routines of the public schools.

dollars during the program through work with student-run businesses to build and sell boats and patio furniture. Youth typically earn \$500 to \$800 over the course of the program, although they can claim these rewards only if they graduate the program.

According to John Dillow, who oversees Fresh Start as director of Living Classrooms' Maritime Institute, the key to Fresh Start's success is the close personal attention participants receive both during and after the program. At Living Classrooms, each group of four-five participants has its own instructor, and each participant meets daily with the instructor to review his performance. Following graduation, Fresh Start continues to monitor and counsel graduates, with help from a team of "retention specialists."

Because of the close supervision and strict rules of the program, Fresh Start has a high attrition rate. Of the 154 youth who have entered the program between July 1997 and June 2000 and completed at least two weeks, 112 completed at least one 8-week module and 50 (32 percent) completed the entire 40-week program cycle. However, the long-term success of these graduates underscores the value of Fresh Start: 66 percent of graduates were either employed and/or enrolled in education in December 2000. Wages among the 52 percent of graduates who were employed averaged \$7.67.⁵⁴

Perhaps most impressively, only 19 percent of Fresh Start graduates had been rearrested since leaving the program, and only 7 percent had been reincarcerated – this in a state where 76 percent of youth released from state-funded juvenile corrections facilities are re-arrested within three years. Despite its far higher success rates, the 40-week Fresh Start program costs the state less than half as much as a 40-week stay in a juvenile corrections facility. Less cost, more safety.

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Nine Vocations. In addition to its academic activities, every Gulf Coast participant also enrolls in one of nine vocational programs:

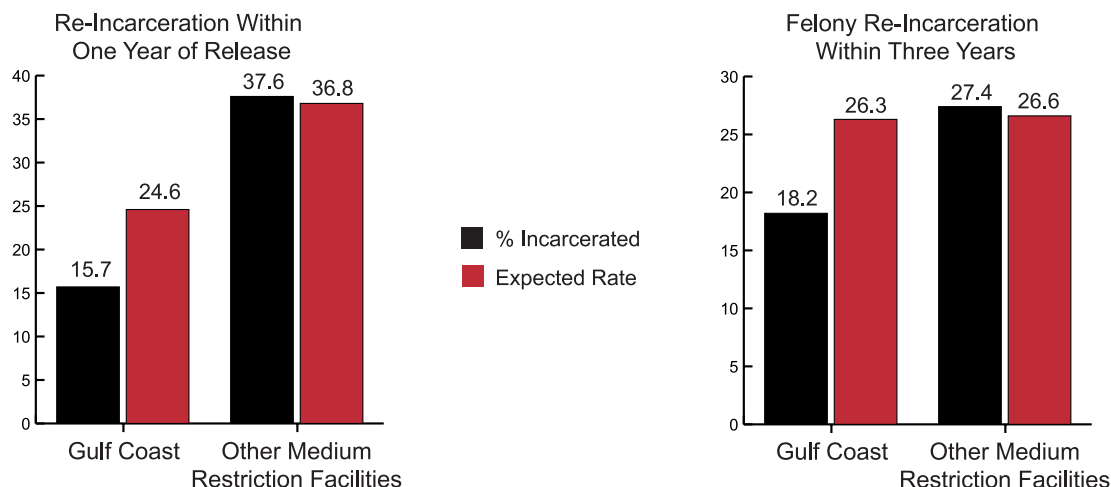
- ◆ construction carpentry
- ◆ painting and decorating
- ◆ bricklaying/stone masonry
- ◆ culinary arts (cooking)
- ◆ horticulture-related occupations
- ◆ building trades (plumbing/electrical)
- ◆ automotive technology (and repair)
- ◆ mill and cabinetmaking
- ◆ office support systems (and office technology)

For each vocational track, Gulf Coast has a customized workshop, a dedicated instructor, and a 915-hour vocational curriculum. These curricula include a mixture of classroom lectures and hands-on learning

activities. In the automotive shop, for instance, participants perform maintenance on the 36 vehicles owned by Gulf Coast. In the office support systems shop, they learn to operate office software programs and perform diagnostic tests and repairs on Gulf Coast's office computers. In addition, all participants take part in job readiness training to prepare them for the world-of-work, and most also take drivers education training.

Real-World Work Experience. In each vocational track, participants must demonstrate mastery of several dozen competencies in order to earn a vocational certificate. During their stays at Gulf Coast (which average six to nine months), 80 to 90 percent of Gulf Coast youth earn this credential, at which point they can participate in Gulf Coast's work experience activities (and begin wearing green shirts, rather than the blue trainee shirts they've worn until then).

**GULF COAST TRADES CENTER:
RE-INCARCERATION VS. OTHER MEDIUM RESTRICTION JUVENILE FACILITIES IN TEXAS**



Source: Data provided via fax by Dr. Chuck Jeffords, Texas Youth Commission, December 2000.

Work assignments include maintenance or office work activities within the Gulf Coast campus itself, or part-time jobs with local government agencies and nonprofit corporations in the New Waverly area. Gulf Coast staff transport the youth to and from these assignments, and they monitor participants' performance on the job through written agreements with the employers, plus frequent phone calls and site visits. The work activities are supported through the federal Workforce Investment Act (successor to the Job Training Partnership Act), and participants are paid minimum wage for all hours worked. Some money is deducted from many participants' wages for restitution, and the remaining wages are placed in savings accounts to be used for expenses related to finding employment. The balance is released when youth begin working in unsubsidized jobs in their home communities.

While work experience opportunities have long been a cornerstone of Gulf Coast's rehabilitative strategy, these opportunities have become even a more positive tool over the past three years thanks to the agency's new housing construction efforts. Gulf Coast established its own housing development corporation in 1998. Since then, with funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's YouthBuild program (which provides funding for education and training and for wages), as well as a

companion state "YouthWorks" program (which provides funding for materials and construction costs), Gulf Coast has built eight new homes, with another five scheduled to begin construction in January 2001.

At any one time, 35 youth can participate in Gulf Coast's YouthBuild program, and these youth split their time evenly between academics and on-the-job construction training. They participate in most aspects of the construction process – from laying foundation, to framing, to sheet-rocking, to roofing. Only highly technical areas, such as electrical wiring and plumbing, are left primarily to experienced professionals. Once finished, Gulf Coast sells the houses to low and moderate-income families at bargain prices (as low as \$50,000 for a new three-bedroom home).

Aftercare (and Job Placement). After training delinquent youth for careers and providing them on-the-job work experience, Gulf Coast does not simply send them home and wish them luck. Rather, the agency provides extensive aftercare support – including job search and job placement assistance. Roughly half of the graduates take part in an intensive 90-day aftercare program, in which Gulf Coast staff serve as advocates and mentors, visiting youth in their homes at least three times per week. Another 40 percent of graduates take part in a more moderate aftercare program, and 10 percent live too far away

from Gulf Coast to receive aftercare support. Regardless of where they live, all Gulf Coast graduates receive job placement and job coaching assistance.

Behavior Management and Supervision. In addition to its strong emphases on academics, vocational training, work experience, and aftercare, Gulf Coast utilizes many behavioral management and counseling strategies typical in other juvenile corrections facilities. Gulf Coast uses a level system to rate each youth weekly on their behavior and cooperation, and then it allots privileges – recreational time, use of a game room, off-campus outings – for youth ranked at level three or level four (the top level). Youth can be dropped a level at any time for serious misconduct, and it takes two weeks of good behavior to restore a youth to his or her prior level. Gulf Coast also supports a Youth Leadership program, in which youth who volunteer can meet quarterly with the agency’s board and have a say in facility policies, serve on an appeals board to hear other participants’ grievances, qualify for the YouthBuild program, and go on occasional special outings.

Unfortunately, both staff and participants at Gulf Coast report that the behavior management regimen has suffered in recent years due to problems with the direct care workers who supervise youth in their dorms. In the past, many of these direct care workers were criminology students at nearby Sam Houston State College. However, as the economy has picked up in recent years, fewer and fewer students have applied for these jobs. As a result, Gulf Coast is increasingly forced to hire local residents with limited skills. Even after granting a wage increase in 2000, Gulf Coast pays the direct care workers a maximum

of only \$7 per hour during their first year on the job. Thus, staff turnover is high, and some of those hired lack the skills or motivation to rigorously enforce the Gulf Coast behavior management philosophy.

MORE WORK, LESS RECIDIVISM

Despite these staffing challenges, performance data from Gulf Coast reveal that its vocational approach to juvenile corrections is working. According to the Texas Youth Commission (TYC), only 15.7 percent of youth who graduated from Gulf Coast from 1995 through 1999 were incarcerated within one year of release – compared to 37.6 percent of Texas youth released from other moderate security residential facilities during this same period. TYC also performed a statistical analysis (involving 20-30 variables) to calculate the predicted incarceration rate based on the specific profiles of youth in the Gulf Coast program, and it found that 36 percent fewer Gulf Coast graduates were incarcerated than its sophisticated model predicted. Likewise, the one-year arrest rate for violent offenses among Gulf Coast graduates was 29 percent lower than expected. Also, a three-year recidivism analysis found that Gulf Coast graduates’ overall incarceration rate was 32 percent lower than expected and its incarceration rate for felony offenses was 31 percent lower.⁵⁵

In addition to staying out of trouble, Gulf Coast graduates also excelled in terms of academic and occupational achievement. Roughly 60 percent of Gulf Coast graduates complete their GEDs, and 60 percent find employment in their chosen occupational field at an average starting wage of \$7.50 per hour.

Operating Agency	Gulf Coast Trades Center
Program Type	Privately-Run Residential Corrections Facility
Program Goals	Rehabilitation and Career Preparation for Juvenile Offenders
Target Group	Youthful offenders committed to state custody
Key Strategies	Intensive vocational training in nine career tracks; job readiness training and work experience; strong aftercare supervision and support
Primary Funding Source(s)	Texas Youth Commission; county probation agencies; US Department of Housing and Urban Development; Workforce Investment Act
Evidence of Effectiveness	Low recidivism, high percentage of graduates employed at living wages
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