

Credible Messengers: Lived Experience is Expertise

Episode 1: Introduction to Credible Messengers

Summary:

Host Iliana Pujols sits down with Clinton Lacey, president and CEO of the Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement (CM3), to unpack the term credible messenger to learn what a credible messenger is – and isn't. Lacey is considered one of the founders of the movement, and he gives us a rundown of the work he has done both in New York and DC with credible messenger programs. Previously, Lacey served as Director of the District of Columbia Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) and Deputy Commissioner of the New York City Probation Department.

Host:

As the current Policy Director of the Connecticut Justice Alliance, Iliana began her work with the Alliance in late 2017 as one of the founding members of the Justice Advisors. In July of 2018, Iliana joined the full-time staff of the Alliance and has since played a critical role in recruiting, training, and supporting the Justice Advisors as well as determining the policies and practices of the organization's work.

Iliana is a 2017-2019 Youth First Initiative's Youth Leaders Network Alum, a 2019 CT Public Allies Alum, and a 2019-2021 Annie E Casey Foundation Youth Advisory Council Alum, and she currently serves as a member of the 2021 World Congress on Justice with Child and Youth Advisory Group. She is a part of the 2022 Young Justice Leaders cohort for the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies.



She is a frequent panelist for national organizations, speaking to her expertise around youth and young adult partnership and advocacy based on her personal experiences and professional success.

She is also currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Social Science at Albertus Magnus.

Guests:

Clinton Lacey is the president and CEO of the Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement (CM3), which focuses on supporting Credible Messenger Mentors who share similar life experiences with current justice-involved young people and works to advance Credible Messenger initiatives nationally.

Previously, Lacey served as Director of the District of Columbia Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) and Deputy Commissioner of the New York City Probation Department. Other positions over his 30-year career include project manager with the W. Haywood Burns Institute, director of the Youth Justice Program at Vera Institute of Justice, and associate executive director of Friends of Island Academy.



Transcript:

(Music for opening credits)

This is the Credible Messengers podcast. Lived experience is expertise.

Iliana Pujols: (0:10)

Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to the Credible Messengers podcast. This podcast is produced by a group of youth policy consultants from AYPF, the American Youth Policy Forum.

We believe that dedicated, credible messenger programs in the legal system, child welfare, K-12 schools and college settings are a powerful way to build community and connection for youth success. We want to see credible messengers move from the margins to become an integral pillar of every system that serves young people marginalized by systemic inequities.

Research supports our claims that credible messengers are effective, and we want to see more research, more funding for that research, more funding for credible messenger programs, and an elevation of the role so that it receives the respect, training, and adequate pay, as do other professionals.

Through this six-part series, we will show you lived examples from this practice, as well as point you to the research. If you are a young person who has faced the legal system, been in foster care, attended low-income K-12 schools, have a parent who's been incarcerated, or you were the first from the family to go to college, this podcast is for you. If you grew up in neighborhoods that have been historically excluded, where black and brown youth are robbed of the opportunities to thrive, this is for you. If you are a community member or a concerned citizen, join this conversation. If you are a teacher, a social worker, police officer, a college professor, or other person whose job is to serve young people, this podcast is definitely for you. And if you're a person in a position to fund research or a researcher in the position to examine credible messenger programs, just stay where you are, because this podcast is most definitely for you.

Iliana Pujols: (1:52)

This is episode one, An Introduction to Credible Messengers. And I'm your host, Iliana Pujols. A little bit about myself: I am currently the policy director of the Connecticut Justice Alliance, and I've worked with American Youth Policy Forum as a policy consultant for a little bit over a year now. Our group of youth policy consultants has decided to host this series of conversations about credible messengers because we want you to not only know what a credible messenger is and how impactful the work is, but we want you to join us in imagining the potential of having more credible messengers, not only in the legal system, but also in education spaces and the child welfare system. And the list goes on.

So let's be real. I myself, along with the other podcast hosts and as well as many of our guests, have had negative experiences with systems that oppress, exclude, or just straight up failed to adequately serve young people marginalized by systemic inequities. I was a part of the system, specifically the youth legal system, from ages 12 to 18. After that, I got involved with the Connecticut Justice Alliance. From there on, I've made sure to engage in many different opportunities. It takes a really incredible amount of courage and vulnerability to share this, and our stories help illustrate the main focus of this podcast. That main focus being that our experiences are our expertise, and that credible messengers like ourselves can have a radical, positive impact upon young people. So let's get down to business.

This episode will be the first episode of a six-part series. In this episode particularly, we will learn everything about what a credible messenger is and what it is not. I am beyond grateful to have one of the leaders of the movement, Clinton Lacey, join us for this conversation.

Are you curious to understand what a credible messenger is? Just stay tuned.

(Segue Music)

Iliana Pujols: (3:47)

Many of you are probably wondering what a credible messenger is. Let's hear a take from some of our guests.

Yasmine Arrington: (3:53)

The credible messenger is someone who has been there, done that, someone who has a similar or shared life experience with the individual that they are coming to walk alongside.

Serita Cox: (4:06)

Having another young person who's gone through similar circumstances gives instant credibility to whatever they have to say.

Clinton Lacey: (4:16)

The whole purpose of a credible messenger is to say the experiences that can bridge people to form trusting relationships is, in fact, the medicine, is the cure, is the healing space that people need in the support.

Iliana Pujols: (4:33)

Let's welcome our first guest, Clinton Lacey. We are so excited to have him here on the podcast because, well, he was one of the founders of the movement, so who better to tell us about it than him?

Clinton Lacey is many things, many, many impressive things. But to be specific, he's the president and CEO of the Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement, which focuses on supporting credible messenger mentors who share similar life experiences with current young people and work to advance credible messenger initiatives nationally. Previously, Lacey served as the director of the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services and the Deputy Commissioner of the New York City Probation Department.

So a lot of people listening to this podcast might not know what a credible messenger is, what they do. So can you dive into a little bit of what a credible messenger is? What do they do in terms of the work?

Clinton Lacey: (5:22)

Sure. Yeah. And, it's, a credible messenger is a term that's growing in its use, and you're finding it more and more not just in the general sort of language of communities, but definitely even in government solicitations and RFP and what have you. Right? For me, the sort of universal definition of a credible messenger in the context of this work is a person who has inherent credibility to bring a message and to have an impact. In this context, the credibility grows from being rooted in the communities that you serve, having shared life experiences of the people that you're serving.

It does not necessarily mean that a credible messenger was incarcerated and did time in prison, although a large percentage of credible messengers, you know, have had that experience. But credible messengers are those who have other shared life experience in terms of living in justice-impacted communities and otherwise marginalized communities. So credible messengers have been impacted by the justice system, yes, but also have dealt with challenges like housing issues and substance abuse. Right? And health care issues and behavioral health and what have you. Right?

So it's this host of issues and challenges that credible messengers have directly experienced themselves and have survived, and have gained knowledge, wisdom, understanding, insight, and not just that struggle, but also in solutions that have worked for themselves personally.

What they're focused on are solutions to help heal and grow and restore, particularly young people and families who are impacted by the justice system. But beyond just the restoration of the people themselves who have been impacted, credible messengers in our context are focused on even a broader healing and restoration, and that is a healing and restoration of sick systems, or I should say, transformation of sick systems.

So a lot of people think of our youth and our communities of those with the pathology and the illness and the disease. But in fact, credible messengers are here to show that they can have a healing impact not just on people, but that they can be transformers of actual systems. For us, the essence of credible messenger work is people sharing their life experiences, right? Their struggles and their restoration with others. And that's what empowers others. And sharing that, not just with those impacted by the system, but sharing those with the system to help inform the system to create better, more healthy and helpful practices and policies that impact the community.

Some people would reduce credible messenger to one of the forms of violence interruption, so that's something that's growing in its popularity. And for some people, when they think of a credible messenger, that's what they think. And that's one of the things that credible messengers do. The work that I've been focused on connects to that work, but is more centered on long term engagement of people and again, policy and system transformation.

Iliana Pujols: (8:35)

This is interesting because you brought up the whole like a credible messenger isn't just somebody who was previously incarcerated, right? A credible messenger can have experiences in multiple different systems, multiple different areas. And that's one of the reasons why we decided to do this podcast series, because the people who don't do know about credible messengers tend to sometimes think that it's just somebody who's been previously incarcerated.

Clinton Lacey: (8:55)

Yes.

Iliana Pujols: (8:55)

And that if you're previously incarcerated, you're automatically a credible messenger, which is not the case. You got to put in the work.

Clinton Lacey: (9:01)

That's right! (laughter)

Iliana Pujols: (9:02)

You got to get back to your community. You have to be doing something positive in some way, shape, or form. But we wanted people to understand that, like you might be a young person who's homeless, and a credible messenger to you might be somebody who was also homeless.

Clinton Lacey: (9:13)

That's right.

Iliana Pujols: (9:14)

Right? So just happening to those different things. So can you tell me a little bit about where the idea of a credible messenger comes from? How was it created?

Clinton Lacey: (9:21)

Yeah, great question. You know, so I always say that we certainly didn't create it and that the notion of a credible messenger is actually an ancient concept that's grown out of people's struggles against oppression. Whenever there have been marginalized and oppressed people and people impacted by systems and criminalized within those systems, there have always been people have stood up, those very impacted people, to resist and to offer a new way and offer a way of hope and equity and fairness and justice. And so that to me is ancient. So we can, you know, that's historical.

So we can go back in history and kind of start naming credible messengers. You know, Harriet Tubman was a credible messenger, she was in prison. You know, Pedro Albizu Campos was criminalized.

Iliana Pujols: (10:08)

So, the concept has always made sense?

Clinton Lacey: (10:09)

Right! Malcolm X, Right? You can just go through history: men and women and various cultures. So that's not new, right? So I feel like we tapped into a tradition and into a legacy.

Iliana Pujols: (10:24)

What is the big difference between a mentor and a credible messenger?

Clinton Lacey: (10:29)

You know, in our society mentoring has become this volunteer, put in a few hours, sometimes relational, often transactional process, right? To try to help get somebody ready for a job, ready for school, which can be fine. Right. And which can help a young person advance in some ways.

Credible messenger mentoring, right? Credible messenger work is about forming a deep, trusting relationship. It's about committing to work with a young person over time and to co-navigate that process with them. Right? So it's not once a week. It's not just for a few months.

Iliana Pujols: (11:10)

Twenty-four seven – on call! (Laughter)

Clinton Lacey: (11:08)

It is twenty-four seven for as long as it takes. And those relationships live on even after the young person is out of jail, out of, off probation, out of crisis. Right? So this is a very different type of engagement than what we think of as traditional mentoring.

Iliana Pujols: (11:26)

Most credible messengers wouldn't even be eligible to apply for a traditional mentoring program because of their criminal background.

Clinton Lacey: (11:33)

The very people with the experience, insight, commitment, medicine. Right. For our youth and families, those who have traditionally been locked out of the process.

Clinton Lacey: (11:48)

My connection to the work began in New York City, really in the nineties, when I met Eddie Ellis, who had done time in prison, was wrongfully convicted and did like 24 years in prison. While there, he created think tanks and this process for the people there to begin to really be intentional about playing a role in resisting against what they were commonly referred to as the prison industrial complex. Now we more say mass incarceration, but the same thing, right? And thinking about what impact could they have even in prison, but then as they came home. But Eddie would play a major role. He started the Center for New Leadership, and I met him when I was working with young people at Rikers Island.

Well, fast forward to 2011, and I got recruited to come over to the Department of Probation in New York City as the Deputy Commissioner, which was its own sort of unexpected....

Iliana Pujols: (12:44)

Position? (Laughter)

Clinton Lacey: (12:44)

Yeah, sort of situation and opportunity. The very reasons why it was odd and surprising ended up being why the commissioner there at the time, Vinny Schiraldi, said he recruited me. He wanted people who were not from the system, had not been probation officers, and people who had spent their time and life working in the community, with the community, and brought a community perspective to the work as a way to try to change culture at probation and change policy and change the experience for people who were being impacted by the department. So it was there that we actually brought in Eddie Ellis and others. Antonio Fernandez, formerly known as King Tone and others, came in to start...

Iliana Pujols: (13:24)

Watched him give a speech once. No joke, is what he sounded like!

Clinton Lacey: (13:25)

Yeah, Tone is super powerful. Yeah.

David Muhammad, who's doing a lot of work around the country now on violence prevention, was my predecessor, and he had been talking about transformative mentoring as well and work that he had previously done with DeV Vaughn Boggans at the Mentoring Center. But we launched this initiative called Arches at Probation, where we funded 20 organizations to hire these transformative mentors to be the front line of people engaging our 16- to 24-year-olds, which would become known as a credible messenger initiative. So for four years I was at probation, and the initiative was very successful in a number of ways. One of them was, like, unprecedented recidivism reduction of 60% that the Urban Institute did a study that showed that.

Iliana Pujols: (14:19)

I'd like to take a pause for a moment to just highlight this research that Clinton mentions. Right, because it shows how effective and important credible messenger programs are. The Urban Institute did a study on the Arches program that Clinton helped create to serve young people ages 16 to 24, who were on probation, and they found individuals who participated in the Arches transformative mentoring program were less likely to be re-convicted of a crime: 69% lower 12 months after beginning probation, and 57% lower 24 months after beginning probation. We're talking about a big decrease in recidivism. What's more, the study found that participants achieved improvement in self perception and relationships with others. So we know credible messenger programs work not just to help

keep people from entering the system, but to actually improve their own sense of self-worth.

Clinton Lacey: (15:14)

But of course, we know that, you know, recidivism reduction – that's great. That's important. We don't want we don't want people going to prison and to jail and what have you. But behind that was a greater story behind the statistics. And that was clearly that if the system would invest, right, not in itself, as it traditionally does, but would invest in the communities that are most impacted by it, that in those communities are leaders who traditionally the system has not thought of as leaders, but they can have a transformative impact on the people that the system continues to fail.

A narrative started to build. We started to document incidents of credible messengers engaging in 24-7 crisis intervention. Right? So credible messengers receiving calls and cries for help and outreach from family about young people who, one young person was on a roof expressing that he was going to commit suicide and a credible messenger was able to rush to the scene and actually talk him, literally talk him off of the ledge and off of the roof.

Several incidents of young people being in the community where they see the person who just got home from jail, who killed their brother or the person who had harmed them or their loved ones in some way. And they had this opportunity to avenge it in some kind of violent way. But instead of taking those actions, reached out to that credible messenger instead and to share where they were, what they were feeling, and what was about to happen.

And so this narrative was building of the impact of credible messengers as successfully providing young people with exit strategies from crisis and helping them to develop the capacity to talk themselves out of a situation, to make a different decision that would be healthier and better for them and their families.

But then we also saw a proactive engagement, not just responses to crisis, which is obviously was really important, but credible messengers knocking on the door and waking kids up at 6:30 in the morning to get them ready for school and navigating with them to school, right. Until they start to develop the habit of going back and engaging, navigating relationships, broken relationships between young people and their families, their loved ones, where they weren't living at home for a year because of whatever the situation was. Credible messengers help to bridge and help mend relationships by developing relationships with family members and the young people.

Obviously helping young people navigate probation itself and navigate the justice system in such a way that they could keep themselves free of any further penetration into the justice system. But connecting that to helping young people reconnect to their dreams. Like, you

know, we use words like dreams, love, belief, things that some system doesn't use, that some think are sort of abstract or amorphous.

But they're so very real to us, right? And it's so real when kids have a sense of hope is everything. Because we know what it looks like when they don't have hope, right? So then we need to know what helping to grow hope looks like.

Iliana Pujols: (18:38)

So from Arches, what did you do next? Tell me a little bit more about what you did in DC.

Clinton Lacey: (18:45)

I left New York and went to DC in 2015, and we expanded the initiative in DC. So Washington, DC's juvenile justice agency, local agency, is called the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, or DYRS. When I was at DYRS, we were part of an effort on the part of several people and ultimately the City Council here in the District around the way young people are treated, because previously many of them, even if they weren't incarcerated, they were being sent all over the country to these residential placements. DYRS had the authority to decide once committed by the court, whether a child would go to a facility or stay in the community.

So, the vast majority of DYRS kids, you know, we kept in the community. And the way we did that, I should just say, is we initially had credible messengers in the community serving our young people in DC. So, we attacked that part of our budget and that practice and brought kids home, and drastically reduced sending kids to residential placements, kept them home in the community, and invested the money that we could recoup into paying for credible messenger services. And that was the formula.

And we expanded it to serve not just the young people committed by the court to our agency in DC, but to their families. So in DC, the credible messenger providers, the grassroots organizations were funded and supported to have credible messengers not just serving young people. Now grandma, mom, caregivers, siblings. Because of course, again, another thing that's known by people who work in the community with people that you don't work with, working with a young person in isolation is not reality. They're part of a family. They live in an ecosystem they don't live.

Iliana Pujols: (20:33)

Who do they trust?

Clinton Lacey: (20:34)

Right. Exactly.

Iliana Pujols: (20:35)

Who do they live with? Who do they call if something happens?

Clinton Lacey: (20:38)

That's right. So that was effective. And then the next step became clear for us, you know, that we needed to infuse credible messages into the facilities. One of the things that we were able to do was to get children who were charged as adults out of the DC jail.

Iliana Pujols: (20:53)

I mean, let's be real, right? Kids shouldn't be in adult facilities for many reasons that are supported with lots of data. Right. Prisons are ineffective, children are not adults, and the adult system is not, you know, properly equipped to support young people. A lot of adult facilities don't offer training on how to support young people. Young people have different needs than adults.

They relocated them in a campus where kids were able to get outside of the city and get fresh air and they could ride bikes. And there was a charter school, and the programs had credible messengers built into them.

Clinton Lacey: (21:30)

Correct. We thought it was important that we brought them to such a place where we could do some healing, restorative work with them. On the front line, the primary engagers of those young people were credible messengers, so we implemented credible messengers into our secure settings. So they're there from when kids wake up, until after they go to bed, with them throughout the day. And they've had a particular impact on these young people, some of whom are facing, you know, serious prison time. Right. It was really important with regards to timing as well, because another progressive piece of legislation by the city council was to outlaw solitary or home confinement.

For us, it was room confinement. So each young person has an individual room with a steel door, of course. Right. So punishments for incidents could result in time in your room. Right.

You know, three days in your room, or go to bed after dinner for a week and no interaction after 5:00, these kinds of punishments. So solitary room confinement as a punishment was outlawed. Well, frankly, you know, members of the union and others were, you know, very upset and saying they were taking away their authority. They have no way to keep the place safe anymore because they can't use that as a punishment, which was false, which was like never true.

But what we did implement was restorative justice responses to incidents instead of punitive responses. And so instead of a, you know, process where there was a fight or an incident between a youth and a youth or youth and a staff, and then the punishment - a

restorative circle process was put in place led by credible messengers. So the credible messengers were trained in restorative justice. It was important to say, no, there's a different and a better way to do this. Right. And the credible messengers were the facilitators and representatives of that better way. So they actually facilitated, which which was big. And people who roll their eyes and say, you know, that restorative justice work is coddling or it's soft on crime or whatever it is.

Iliana Pujols: (23:42)

Doesn't hold people accountable...

Clinton Lacey: (23:43)

Right. It's the very opposite. It's very real. It's all about taking responsibility and confronting what one has done as an individual, but in a holistic sense. And how has that impacted the community? What about the community has impacted them? So there's a real sort of confrontation of those issues. And frankly, you know, initially when we started it, a lot of the young people were like, "Can I just get my punishment, man? Just send me to my room," because this is work like they weren't used to this process. It's hard work to really confront stuff. But we knew it was a healthier process for them. Right. And they started to get into it.

So this is led by credible messengers. And so when we brought in credible messengers into the facility, we were intent and clear that we didn't want them to be marginalized inside the facility. So credible messengers get in facilities in certain times and places around the country. So often it's like, here's your hour, run your group and leave, right? They're not part of...

Iliana Pujols: (24:47)

The staff, the culture...

Clinton Lacey: (24:47)

Changing the culture. Exactly. So we were intent upon that. So we we formed a team of credible messengers, restorative justice specialists, who we had trained, and our behavioral health team that we essentially rebuilt. We brought in a new behavioral health leader who believed in and practiced restorative practices and understood what we were doing.

And together they formed the team who were responsible for all programing and activities, you know, outside of the school day in the facility. So credible measures were at the table, making schedules, designing programing, facilitating programs, right.

Iliana Pujols: (25:26)

It's funny because you were talking about how kids often say, like, "Can I, just, send me to my room."

Clinton Lacey: (25:31)

Yeah, yeah.

Iliana Pujols: (25:31)

And it reminds me when I went to an alternative high school, and we used to do Girl Circle everyday after lunch. I used to always tell them, like, "I don't even want to sit in a circle. I don't want to be with the girls. Stop putting me in here." By the end of my first year at that school, they could've let me run the circle.

Clinton Lacey: (25:47)

Right!

Iliana Pujols: (25:48)

I was like, now I'm a professional at this. Now I could sit here. I would rather argue my problems out with you in the circle than for us to carry our beef on to the end of the school year, it's just not real, right.

Clinton Lacey: (25:59)

Yeah, that is so real.

Iliana Pujols: (26:00)

Yeah. So I was thinking about that while you were talking about the kids, like just not wanting to hear it. What do you think are some challenges that arise when trying to adopt this model?

Clinton Lacey: (26:10)

Yeah, you know, the fear and the prejudice is still prominent, right. In terms of who credible messages are, people's bias and perceptions, right. The professional culture that we have and the bureaucracy that we have, particularly in justice systems and other systems of care, is obviously still a real problem. We saw early on that training is good, but that the only way we were going to really change culture was to bring people into the space and throw them into the machine, into the mix. So we literally and figuratively did that. So the example of bringing in credible messengers to the facilities, that was what helped the culture change there. Them being there, fighting it out, struggling, conflicts with staff, mediating, you know, team building, relationship building. That has changed the culture. So in the community, we did the same thing and did extensive team building, relationship retreats between staff and credible messengers to try to reach a common understanding.

Iliana Pujols: (27:16)

Sometimes I feel like it's just, they're not used to changing practices.

Clinton Lacey: (27:21)

Right.

Iliana Pujols: (27:22)

It takes a lot to get somebody to change a practice.

Clinton Lacey: (27:24)

It does.

Iliana Pujols: (27:25)

It takes even more to get them convinced to implement something like this. When it comes down to, like, the people that are leading this movement, being directly impacted.

Clinton Lacey: (27:35)

Absolutely.

Iliana Pujols: (27:36)

And I think having records, having that experience, that makes it ten times harder.

Clinton Lacey: (27:40)

It does. I think one of the challenges for system leaders and systems to do that is, one of them is their identity. You know, I always used to say, you know, "Who do we think we are?" Right. So system people think, even those well-intended, those who aren't still on the whole punitive thing, which many are, but there's people in systems who are, like, well-intended and want to help, but they still see themselves and their practices, and their classrooms, and their apparatus, and their evidence-based practices as the medicine, as the cure. And they don't see that the answers are in the community. So they think they got to do this for people or to people as opposed to say, no, you have the solutions, how can I invest and support you to bring the healing and the restoration. So that, I think you're absolutely right.

Iliana Pujols: (28:31)

We've always said, at least in my work back at the Alliance, we've always said, like, the people closest to the problem are closest to the solution. And although I don't like necessarily using the term all the time, because it's unfortunate that that has to be what it is, but you can't, if you want to solve a problem, you have to talk to the people who are enduring the impact of that problem. Right.

Clinton Lacey: (28:50)

That's it.

Iliana Pujols: (28:51)

So my question is, do you think lived experience should be equivalent to, say, a degree? Right. For example, should we be hiring credible messengers to be social workers but without an MSW (Master of Social Work), because that's essentially what they're doing.

Clinton Lacey: (29:06)

Yes, absolutely right. And so I absolutely think that credible messengers are highly exploited people, as you just said. That we want them, people want them there on the front line when it's hot, when it's dangerous, when we're afraid, where it seems out of control. Right.

But then marginalized just to those situations. Not included as equal partners in a process, not paid as such.

Iliana Pujols: (29:30)

They're not staff, they're babysitters.

Clinton Lacey: (29:32)

Right. Where's the investment in the credible messengers trajectory? Growth trajectory? Right. And yes, the value of their experience is an insight and hard earned wisdom and ability through blood, sweat, tears, sacrifice, and suffering is at the very least equal to, you know, what can be earned by way of degrees in academia. Right. And this is not to pit those two things against one another, but let's just start valuing ability, talent, and effectiveness according to what it is that we're trying to achieve. If we're trying to achieve "public safety," quote unquote, if we're trying to achieve wellness and connecting young people, then not to value credible messengers is really dishonest.

Iliana Pujols: (30:18)

Obviously, over the last couple of years, we've seen a huge rise in many topics, specifically charging kids as adults. Younger and younger and younger. Right, as the years go on, the bracket gets younger that people want to charge them as adults. So do you feel like, and it might be rhetorical, do you feel like credible messengers could support a kid who may commit a serious offense, for example, rape, homicide, murder, whatever it may be?

Clinton Lacey: (30:43)

Yeah. You know, it's such a twisted way of thinking that the more serious trouble that a young person gets in, that we treat them like an adult. As though the treatment of adults has proven to be effective in rehabilitation.

Iliana Pujols: (30:57)

Right.

Clinton Lacey: (30:57)

Right. The opposite. So, that's really kind of interesting to me. But yeah, credible messengers absolutely have had real impact, positive impact with young people who have got into serious trouble and committed more, you know, dangerous and harmful, even, you know, loss of life cases.

Iliana Pujols: (31:22)

I once had somebody tell me that credible messengers were not the silver bullet. And my immediate reaction and response was that's exactly what they are. Credible messengers is the silver bullet, whether we're talking about diversion, whether we're talking about reentry, whether we're talking about incarceration, at whatever phase a kid comes in contact with whatever, you can insert a credible messenger.

Clinton Lacey: (31:44)

You are absolutely, I totally agree...

Iliana Pujols: (32:45)

They'll prevent it. They'll help heal it. During and after. Like, it's just, it is the silver bullet to me now. And I've talked about it as that, as such.

Clinton Lacey: (31:54)

I love it. What you said is so true. I think, I have the same idea. At every point in the continuum, right, that you have credible messenger presence, perspective, engagement, right, at the front end, all the way through, through court, probation, diversion, incarceration, reentry. Right. And the reason why adult...

Iliana Pujols: (32:20)

Adult, full blown adult after 25.

Clinton Lacey: (32:23)

And beyond justice, right. Like we know people in the justice system because they've essentially been failed by a host of other institutions in our society. Health care, education, housing. Right.

Iliana Pujols: (32:35)

Child welfare...

Clinton Lacey: (32:36)

Right. So we know justice ends up sort of being a default for for all of that. So when we talk about credible messengers, the implications are exactly as you said. Yeah. We can focus on the justice system where it's really needed because of the the harshness of the system, but the implications for a credible messenger work to impact all systems of care. Right. We need, which is again, back where we started. Credible messenger, people say it's not a

silver bullet. Well, maybe they can't digest that, but community empowerment, community perspective, community participation is. So credible messengers is just an example, that's what they are, they are community, living members of the community.

Iliana Pujols: (33:22)

Because why wouldn't you want somebody who can relate to your child or to you, help and support you through similar experience that they also shared?

Clinton Lacey: (33:29)

Yeah, absolutely.

Iliana Pujols: (33:31)

Where is the credible messenger movement headed? And, what is, what would be your call to action to the audience listening to this podcast?

Clinton Lacey: (33:38)

I think the credible messenger movement is headed towards a greater network and family of credible messengers around the country who know each other, who support each other, who learn from one another. Right. And who then collectively can have greater impact to engage and help to transform systems at every point in the continuum. Right. So I see the future of the movement really infusing credible messengers into the justice system at every point to really help transform it. And then beyond the justice system, that credible messenger work, the concept of it, begins to impact and transform other systems of care. We need credible messengers in health care, right, in housing, in education. So I think that's the future of the movement.

Iliana Pujols: (34:28)

And what would be your call to action for those listening to the podcast?

Clinton Lacey: (34:33)

I would first say that everyone listening has a role play, right. Whether you're a credible messenger, whether you're a person who's been impacted by the system, a young person, a family, an educator, a person working inside of the system. Right. A judge or just an interested community member, that we all have a role to play that ultimately is about supporting the work. Right. Learning more about it in your community. Ensuring that it's not a body of work that is exploiting people, but that is really empowering community members, that credible messengers are really being invested in, in a way that speaks to their growth and development and opportunity to be equal players and the work to transform our systems. And I think that we can all play some role in that.

[Music for closing credits]

Iliana Pujols: (35:27)

Thank you so much for having this conversation with me and obviously making my podcast the best.

Clinton Lacey: (35:34)

Iliana, it is such a pleasure to be here with you and I enjoyed this conversation and I'm just excited about the work that you're doing and will continue to follow it and...

Iliana Pujols: (35:44)

We'll reflect five years from now and do another podcast and...

Clinton Lacey: (35:47)

Let's do it!

Iliana Pujols: (35:46)

And be like, "Oh, remember we talked about that!"

Clinton Lacey: (35:48)

Alright! I'll be there, I'll show up.

Iliana Pujols: (35:51)

This is great.

Clinton Lacey: (35:52)

Cool.

Iliana Pujols: (35:54)

If there's anything I want my listeners to take away from this podcast, it's to leave this and start conversations.

If you're in a position to fund something like this, to fund the research, to fund the program, take that action. If you're a young person, right, you're a young person and you're looking for somebody to support you on a positive pathway, take that initiative, identify a person, identify a person you trust, identify a person who's credible and build that relationship. If you're a school looking to embed something like this into your school environment, right, take that initiative.

I think everybody here today has an action of just leaving this conversation and really finding out how can you make that next step to fully embed credible messengers into systems that aren't currently working.

Thank you for listening to the Credible Messengers podcast. We hope that we have inspired you in some way to take action. As Clinton Lacy said, let's move credible messengers out of the margins, let's ensure more credible messenger programs exist, and that credible messengers are well paid, supported, resourced and trained. We need research, more funding for research, and more formalized paid roles for credible messengers so that all young people marginalized by systemic inequities, can have opportunities to fulfill their dreams.

This podcast is hosted and directed by a group of youth policy consultants from AYPF, the American Youth Policy Forum, including

Daftne Sanchez: (37:26)

Daftne Sanchez.

Armonté Butler: (37:28)

Armonté Butler.

Brittany LaMarr: (37:29)

Brittany LaMarr.

Abdul Ali: (37:29)

Abdul Ali.

Ilina Pujols: (37:30)

And me Ilina Pujols.

Our executive producer is the American Youth Policy Forum.

This show is produced, edited, and mixed by Sarah Daggett of Daggett Consulting, LLC.

This episode on the Introduction to Credible Messengers was directed and hosted by me, Ilina Pujols.

This is the Credible Messengers Podcast.

Thank you for listening.