

Maine Youth Justice Reentry Project

An OJJDP Second Chance Act Youth Offender Reentry Grant Program

Annual Project Evaluation Report 2020-2021

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INTRODUCTION

Background

The Maine Department of Corrections (MDOC) in collaboration with Youth Advocate Programs (YAP) and the University of Southern Maine, Cutler Institute (USM) was awarded an OJJDP FY19 Second Chance Act Youth Offender Reentry Grant in 2019. The purpose of the project is to provide Maine youth reentering their communities from the justice system supports to help them thrive as they transition into adulthood. The goals of this program include:

- Connect youth reentering their communities after a period of incarceration with a reentry process that improves positive youth outcomes.
- Increase the number of credible adult mentors providing reentry services to high needs youth.
- Increase housing options and housing stability for formerly incarcerated youth.
- Increase the number of formerly incarcerated youth in Maine pursuing post-secondary degrees.

The project is designed to include detained or committed youth (age 12-24) & youth who are on community reintegration or probation for all available programs, with priority given to Girls, Youth of Color, and LGBTQ+ youth. Youth must first access services on or prior to their 21st birthday, but then may continue to be served under this grant until they are 24 years old.

The following program interventions have been implemented to achieve these goals:

1. Maine Community Success Program for youth reentering communities post incarceration. Planning begins 90 days before release (phase 1) and then phase 2 includes a warm handoff to provide continued supportive services post release. MDOC staff will be responsible for phase 1 and Youth Advocate Programs (YAP) will lead phase 2.
2. Credible Messenger Mentors/Advocate Programs will match youth with mentors to provide transition support. YAP will coordinate the mentorships as part of the phase 2 program.
3. Housing Assistance Program will be developed to provide young people in the above program with housing assistance based on individual needs.
4. Opportunity Scholars will connect college-aged youth reentering Maine communities after a period of commitment with application support, connection to financial aid support, and academic support to pursue post-secondary education at USM. Youth will have the option to continue their participation beyond an initial 8-week phase to include paid internship opportunities.¹

The table on the next page summarizes the key dates and project progress at the end of the second grant year.

¹ The original scope of the Opportunity Scholars program limited participation to Cumberland and York counties and included an initial 6-week phase. This has been expanded to include any Maine community and an 8-week introductory phase.

Summary of Key Dates & Project Progress

Grant Year 1	Planning	October 1, 2019	Original Project Start Date (delays due to federal contracts & awards)
		March 2020	Global COVID-19 Pandemic Reaches the U.S. and Maine
		April 1, 2020	Actual Project Start Date
		May 2020	Updated Narrative & Timeline; Moved USM to Subcontractor
			First Implementation Team Meeting (virtual)
		June 2020	YAP & USM Contracts Approved & Signed
		July 2020	YAP & USM Amendment
		August 2020	Implementation Team Meeting (virtual)
			YAP Maine Director Hired & Onboard
			P&I Guide Development & Planning
September 2020	First Advisory Group Meeting (virtual)		
	Implementation Team Meeting (virtual)		
	Finalized P&I Guide		
	Meeting with housing partners & strategy development to leverage housing funds (virtual)		
Grant Year 2	Implementation	October 2020	Final P&I Guide Approved
		November 2020	Final SCA Directive with Referral Matrix & Forms Completed
		February 2021	YAP Gets Access to SCA Funds & Begins Serving Youth on the SCA Program
			USM Finalizes Evaluation Plan
			Updated grant management policies at MDOC
		March 2021	Site Visit from OJJDP
		April 2021	YAP, Opportunity Scholars, and MDOC teams begin regular referrals meetings with Long Creek Staff
			Additional funding added to Opp. Scholars & Housing Funds due to reduction in indirect costs
		May 2021	Opportunity Scholars expanded eligibility criteria to statewide
		July 2021	Opportunity Scholars staff allowed into Long Creek to meet with potential participants
			Partial Match Waiver Request approved
		August 2021	Additional USM Contract Amendment
			Added Driver's Education as an allowable expense on the Housing Fund
Year 3	September 2021	<i>First Housing Funds approved for YAP participant</i>	
	October 2021	<i>USM Final IRB Approval for Evaluation & Data Analysis Plan</i>	
		<i>SCA & YHDP partners convening to align strategies</i>	
November 2021	<i>Presented program at the Runaway and Homeless Youth National Grantee Training & the OJJDP SRAD Conference</i>		

Evaluation Methods

To measure the success of the proposed interventions, MDOC partnered with the University of Southern Maine, Cutler Institute to conduct an ongoing evaluation of the program and project. The evaluation aims to explore the extent to which the program implementation has changed practices or policies in Maine, the impact on the community, and the impact on the individual participants' support, opportunities, and stability. The following research questions are guiding the evaluation:

Process Questions

1. How many participants are served by the project, by program type?
2. How does participation vary by demographics?
3. What have been the successes and challenges of program implementation?
4. What is the total amount of funds allocated to help achieve housing stability?
5. What is average amount of funds allocated per individual and how does that vary by demographics or risk levels?
6. What supports are the housing funds used for?

Impact Questions

7. What impact has participation had on the individual's academic achievement or employment?
8. To what extent do participants improve their housing stability?
9. To what extent has the program improved the participants' support system?
10. What impact has the program had on recidivism for participants and overall community?
11. What impact has the program had on changes to policy or systems procedures?

The proposed evaluation method includes a mixed-method approach to measure the impact and success of each intervention. MDOC will track participant numbers and funds allocated for each program. YAP and Opportunity Scholars participants will receive program surveys upon completion. USM will also conduct interviews with participants and stakeholders in the final year of the project.

This report focuses on the first two years of the grant which included an extended planning period (year 1) and initial program implementation (year 2). Due to the delays in program implementation described later in the report, there were no completed participant surveys to examine for this reporting period and therefore this report focuses on analyzing the challenges, barriers, and accomplishments throughout the project development and implementation period. The evaluation team met with project staff to informally reflect on the progress and gathered feedback from project partners on the implementation and planning. This report summarizes these reflections and makes recommendations for further program improvements moving forward.

FINDINGS

A Look at the Numbers

Total Number of Program Participants 2021

	Q1 Oct-Dec	Q2 Jan-March	Q3 Apr-Jun	Q4 Jul-Sept
YAP	0	1	3	3
OS	0	0	0	2
Housing Funds	0	0	0	0

Youth Advocate Programs (YAP)

YAP began serving youth in January 2021². Between January 2021 and September 2021, YAP served 7 youth on the SCA grant program. Of those youth served during that reporting period, 43% were females and they have all been matched with a mentor. While 29% have needed housing support, only one has requested housing funds at this time. At the time of this report, all youth are still actively engaged with YAP.

Youth Advocate Programs SCA Participants	
Total # Youth Served	7
% Females	43%
Total Advocate Hours	444.1
Average Hours Per Youth	63.44
# Needing Housing Support	29%
# Needing Mental Health Support	14%
# Matched with mentor	100%
Housing Funds Requested	\$500

Opportunity Scholars (OS)

Opportunity Scholars has had 2 peer mentors involved in the SCA program throughout this reporting period. These mentors are long-term scholars who have helped with project management and recruitment for this program. Opportunity Scholars faced many barriers to recruitment (largely due to eligibility and interest) and while they have had many young people indicate interest, they have not yet had anyone fully engaged for the purposes of this grant at this time. There have been 4 youth who have expressed interest in the program, and 2 who have engaged in initial meetings, but 1 has since disengaged and the other is under 18 and not eligible to participate under the SCA grant specifications.

Housing Assistance Program

During this reporting period, the housing program has experienced some challenges in its utilization largely due to administrative issues and eligibility. At the time of this report, only 1 youth has requested housing funds in the amount of \$500³.

² YAP began serving youth in January under another program and transferred them over to the SCA program grant once they received the SCA funds in February.

³ This request was approved and allocated in September 2021.

Reflections From Staff

The project evaluation team solicited informal feedback from project staff and partners to better understand some of the challenges and barriers which occurred throughout the implementation of this project as well as some of the successes and accomplishments. The key themes from this feedback are summarized below.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

This project experienced quite a few setbacks during the planning and initial implementation period. Project staff pointed to the following key themes which have been particularly limiting and contributed to the delay in implementation of the programs.

- **Administrative & Contracts Issues-** This included a delay in the initial project start due to federal awards and contracts issues and a delay in funds access. The project start date got pushed to April 2020.
- **COVID-19-related Challenges-** The global COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the U.S. and Maine in March of 2020 which further delayed the implementation of the project. The pandemic extended the planning period largely due to staff having to shift priorities to focus on pandemic protocols and safety of all youth and staff. The pandemic also did not allow in-person meetings which delayed planning, and initially did not allow program staff to enter the facility to meet directly with youth due to COVID-19 restrictions.
- **Scope and Eligibility Limitations-** Age restrictions, eligibility, and initial scope have been particularly limiting for the Housing Program and the Opportunity Scholars program. Age restrictions on available housing and a lack in supportive housing have made it impossible for many youths to take advantage of the available housing funds. In addition, the original scope of the Opportunity Scholars program was too narrow and had to be adjusted to find youth who might be interested in participating.
- **Recruitment and Timing-** Recruitment has been particularly challenging for the Opportunity Scholars program as most of the youth are not ready to commit to a college path, especially when they need to focus on getting basic needs of stability, security, transportation, and income for their transition period.
- **Start-Up Challenges-** The infancy of the Youth Advocate programs in Maine meant that there was no existing framework to begin serving youth and the structure had to first be developed. YAP had to hire a Maine Director and find a location to operate the YAP programs in this state before they could begin serving youth. The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated this search and delayed the initial hiring process.

Youth Advocate Programs (YAP)

Being new to Maine, YAP lacks the benefit of having operated as an established program inside an existing framework prior to the SCA grant. YAP has had to find staff, office space, and develop operating procedures, which has all been complicated further by the global pandemic and staffing shortages.

In addition, release planning has been a challenge for various reasons (staffing, DOC and YAP coordination, available resources, etc.) and thus YAP has had to do a lot of crisis mitigation in order to help stabilize youths' situations before any higher aspirations conversations can begin. In terms of planning, there is an important distinction between those youth who are committed versus those who are detained. In many ways it is easier to support committed

youth through such initiatives because staff are better able to plan a course of action. Detained youth are much more challenging to plan for because their availability hinges on court dates and they are limited in the transition options. In some cases, YAP has received as little as a 1 week notice before a youth has been released and has had to act as a primary support in finding services to help with mental health and medication management, unstable housing situations, guardians/family relationships, hostile school environments, and finding mentors with little notice. Often, they have found themselves spending the first 2-4 weeks with youth dealing with crisis to crisis such as family fights, getting kicked out of housing, school discipline and truancy, substance use, etc. Project staff noted that **many of the youth are at a point where they are just trying to survive instead of thriving.**

Opportunity Scholars

Opportunity Scholars has struggled to achieve high levels of interest and engagement from youth. This is also a program that is relatively new to Maine, and therefore lacks the benefit of operating inside an existing framework. Like YAP, Opportunity Scholars has struggled to find youth who are ready to think about their future pathways, and who meet eligibility criteria. Upon release, many youths are not ready to consider the possibility of pursuing higher education or a career pathway, and those who are, have a wide variety of post-secondary interests. Many need time post-release to get into the right headspace and stabilize their situations in order to consider attending college. While Opportunity Scholars is designed to support this transition, it has been challenging to engage youth consistently with the program. **The timing of this program and eligibility specifications have presented barriers for youth who were at risk of aging out, but also for those who may not yet be old enough to be eligible to participate.** The limited pool of potential participants coming out of Long Creek has meant that Opportunity Scholars has had to expand the scope of the original plan to find youth who might be interested in the program.

Housing Assistance Fund

During this reporting period, housing has continued to be a major challenge for newly released youth in Maine, and a barrier to successful, independent living. This is despite the availability of housing vouchers and interested youth willing to avail themselves of the assistance offered through this initiative. Several reasons were cited for this, most notably is the fact that **age restrictions disqualify certain youths.** Specifically, there have been some youth who, but for the fact that they are under the age of eighteen, would qualify for housing assistance. Exacerbating this is that these minor youth may not have a legal guardian available to sign the lease on their behalf.

A second major barrier to the successful dissemination of the housing assistance funds is a **lack of partnerships with willing landlords and a lack of affordable housing options.** One reason for landlord hesitation is that as the housing market in the state has tightened during the past two years, there's been a corresponding tightening of the rental market as well. Predictably, this has led to a rise in rental rates—a rise that has outpaced the value of housing vouchers available to the youth. Another reason for landlord hesitation relates to a **general unwillingness to assist in finding creative solutions to support youth, who are frequently unable to meet customary rental market requirements,** such as proof of income and letters of reference from past landlords, or who may be unable to provide so much as a security deposit—let alone first and last month's rent. In addition, many landlords are unaware of this program, and of those who do know of its existence, the existing hesitations mentioned previously create very real obstacles for qualified youth wanting to take advantage of the available funds.

Making the situation even more challenging is that there's not a dedicated professional to act as a housing-specific case manager who might assist qualified youth in accessing available housing vouchers and could dedicate their time to developing and maintaining relationships with prospective landlords. This currently complicates the process and delays the successful matching of qualified youth with willing landlords. In fact, this lack of relational in-roading presents a major barrier all by itself for youth, and the absence of a dedicated housing case manager makes it even more difficult for youth to gain access to housing.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND OUTCOMES

Despite the challenges and barriers experienced in the first two years, the project partners have had a multitude of successes that can be attributed to the SCA grant program. While the number of participants has so far been low, there have been great achievements with changes to policies and practices and strong partnerships have formed, all of which will continue to help support justice involved youth beyond the scope of this grant. Overall, some highlights of this grant have included:

- **Teamwork and Collaboration-** Great teamwork and collaboration have formed the backbone of this process from the beginning. The energy of all partners involved and the consistency with which the teams have met has helped keep everyone committed to the success of this project despite challenging times. The Advisory Team meets quarterly and is made up of a diverse group of stakeholders and community providers. In addition, the Implementation Team met 10 times during the planning phase and included 3 youth with lived experience who informed the design of the programs.
- **The Case Review Team-** The Implementation Team has transitioned to become the Case Review Team during implementation of this project. This team now includes Long Creek staff and meets regularly to discuss referrals. Having the Long Creek staff directly involved in the conversations has helped identify more youth who could benefit from the programs earlier on in their transition planning.
- **Administrative Wins-** There have been several administrative achievements that have been attributed to this grant. In March 2021, MDOC went through a site visit from OJJDP and had zero outstanding findings. As a result of this grant, MDOC also updated outdated grant management policies, which will impact future grants as well. In addition, MDOC was also able to get a Partial Match Waiver approved which allowed for more funds to be allocated directly to the programs.
- **The Technical Assistance and Support-** Project staff highlighted the TA from OJJDP as having been very helpful in generating new ideas and making key connections to experts who have helped inform the process.
- **Leadership-** The commitment and leadership from MDOC on this project was cited as key to ensuring the success of these strategies. It was noted that MDOC has shown great leadership and coordination which has greatly enhanced the collaboration between the agency and the community providers.
- **Cross-Collaboration and Leverage-** An important outcome of this project so far has been the leverage that this grant has given the project teams to be able to initiate conversations with other stakeholders and develop cross collaboration with similar initiatives. This grant has been a large foundation that has formed partnerships with other providers to braid resources and expand capacity to serve youth. One example of this has been the Regional Care Teams initiative which has been informed by Opportunity Scholars and now includes exploring education and employment opportunities for youth.

Youth Advocate Programs (YAP)

YAP has achieved the task of setting up a foundation for their programs in Maine and hired 3 regional program directors to lead the effort statewide. In addition, YAP has seen individual level success as new opportunities have been created for individual youth as a direct result of their participation in the YAP program. Individual youth have been supported by YAP in gaining access to housing and higher education opportunities. In addition, the mentoring piece of the YAP program has been successful and all youth who are currently working with YAP have been paired with a mentor.

Opportunity Scholars

Opportunity Scholars has been able to support 2 peer mentors with lived experience, who have helped with outreach and recruitment. In addition, Opportunity Scholars has recently been able to get into Long Creek to meet directly with potential participants and have had more youth expressing interest in the program since being able to do so.

This grant has also led to a process change in the USM application which will help to improve inclusion at USM for students with justice histories. Opportunity Scholars staff and peer mentors are directly responsible for convincing USM administration to remove the justice history question from the student application which will have long-term impacts on students' ability to apply to USM with less fear and stigma. Staff attribute this success largely to the support of this grant.

Recognizing the need for more low barrier pathways into college, Opportunity Scholars has also partnered with the Youth and Community Engagement (YCE) team at USM to develop a collaborative training program for youth engaged in either initiative, called Rising Leaders. Participants in this training are eligible to receive college credit upon completion.

Housing Assistance Fund

While the housing fund has only allocated a small amount of resources at the time of this report, the project staff have made important connections that will allow them to expand their efforts in developing a successful housing assistance program. One such connection has been the newly developed partnership between MDOC and a group of providers that were awarded funding through the Youth Homeless Demonstration Project (YHDP). This connection will allow MDOC to combine efforts and braid resources to better serve youth through the two initiatives.

In addition, getting approval for Driver's Ed as an allowable expense for the housing fund is a huge win that will greatly benefit youth. For youth who need to support themselves with employment, transportation can be a challenge, particularly in rural parts of Maine and in order for a youth to obtain their license before they turn 18, they are required to complete a Driver's Education course. This is a support that will help youth long term, beyond the period of this grant.

MOVING FORWARD

In the first two years, this project faced a multitude of unanticipated challenges and barriers which slowed planning and delayed implementation. Most notable were administrative issues with the federal contracts and the global COVID-19 pandemic and associated challenges brought on by staff capacity constraints and limitations on in-person activities. Even as implementation started, the project team was faced with new challenges related to eligibility, recruitment, and engagement of the youth. Despite these challenges, the project team has learned some valuable lessons in program design, achieved administrative and policy wins, and developed connections and partnerships with key stakeholders that will outlast this grant. In addition, YAP has been able to serve 7 youth and matched all of them with mentors. Some of these youths have been able to secure housing and access educational opportunities as a direct result of this program. Opportunity Scholars staff have been able to connect with 4 youth and are hopeful that being able to connect directly with youth at Long Creek will lead to more participation in the coming year. With the foundation now built, the project partners are committed and excited to scale up implementation in the coming year. Project staff have highlighted several opportunities as we move into year 3 of the grant, and year 2 of implementation.

Next Steps and Recommendations

- ▶ **Hire or Partner with a Dedicated Housing Case Manager:** A housing case manager is needed to develop relationships with housing providers, act as a liaison to help youth negotiate with landlords and help navigate the housing market. A dedicated staff person could help advocate for youth with justice histories, and help find supportive, willing landlords who can provide housing. MDOC or YAP could hire an additional staff person to serve in this role, or the team could partner with another organization to serve in this capacity.
- ▶ **Improve Awareness & Access Across all Region:** Staff noted a need to improve awareness of the various program initiatives among community providers, and agency partners who are working with justice involved youth. This is particularly true for rural areas and parts of the state outside of southern Maine. It may be that initial communications happened some time ago and during the start of the pandemic, so reminders and expanded communications disseminating information about the various initiatives could help bring in more referrals. Similarly, with the new YAP Regional Directors on board there is an opportunity now to improve access to the various initiatives beyond southern Maine and staff up the project in the other regions to support more youth statewide.
- ▶ **Address Eligibility and Scope of Opportunity Scholars:** Opportunity Scholars and MDOC should continue to review the initiative and generate ideas to address the eligibility issues to expand the scope and hopefully bring in more referrals for this program. Reviewing the program design to ensure it meets the needs of the youth being referred is also key to improving engagement (e.g., exploring ways to support other colleges and diverse career pathways).
- ▶ **Develop Strategies to Help Youth at Risk of Aging Out:** The project team discussed a need to develop strategies aimed at helping those youth who are at risk of aging out of care or eligibility, in order to ensure a smooth and supported transition beyond the scope of these initiatives. One example suggested was the development of a policy such as the Voluntary Extended Care (V9) Agreement for youth aging out of foster care.