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BREAKING THE CYCLE OF INCARCERATION:

A Roadmap to Credible Messenger Recruitment

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“Act on the insights that you’ve taken away from our conversation. Because we talked about things that other people aren’t talking about. If there was something life-changing for you in the conversation, you should share it because you want to, not because [you have to].”

- T Haywood, Lead Mentor, Osborne Association

Executive Summary

Many U.S. neighborhoods have lost their senses of community and peer accountability, which, historically, had organically initiated mentor-mentee dynamics between elder community members and youth at risk of violence or incarceration. This connection has been rekindled by the Credible Messenger movement.

In February 2022, New York City (NYC) Mayor Adams announced that the Department of Probation would pair justice-involved youth 21 years or older with a Credible Messenger (CM). CMs are recognized as individuals with lived experiences¹—frequently in the criminal justice system—who have transformed their lives and become agents of change in their communities.

As CM work enters mainstream policy, now is the time for organizations to replicate promising practices in the CM field, strengthen recruitment processes to maintain the current quality of CM work, and create visibility for the revitalization of community-building and trauma healing through the CM model.

Neighborhood Benches (NB)—a small, grassroots youth mentorship organization based in NYC’s Central Harlem—commissioned the SIPA Capstone Team to report promising practices for maintaining the existing quality and community-developed practices of the CM movement. NB is devoted to educating young people from historically disadvantaged communities on leadership and transformative behavioral practices in order to break cycles of youth incarceration and violence. NB’s programming engages with neighborhoods that are often difficult to engage and overlooked. The organization uses the CM model to further develop community leaders and dedicated practitioners, while seeking to drive down violence and incarceration, particularly around young people.

Currently, the CM field is recognized for its transformative work and impacts related to reducing violence and recidivism. However, there remain constraints and shortcomings to retaining quality CMs and maximizing the impacts of the intervention on participants and CMs themselves. The Team offers recommendations for better recognizing and accommodating CMs as well as detailing current CM recruitment strategies which should be strengthened and replicated. This report provides context on the CM field; background on NB and its organizational practices; and case study observations of related grassroots, nonprofit, and government organizations working in the CM space. Based on insights from interviews with CMs and additional stakeholders,² the Team has compiled the findings and recommendations found below.

¹ See Appendix 1: Definition of Terms.

² See Appendix 3: List of Interviewees.

Key Findings

Identification

- There is a general agreement among organizations on the traits looked for when recruiting, but some disagreement on the work experience candidates should possess.
- There is not enough formal data collection related to individuals involved in CM work and demographics.

Attraction

- Organizations typically do not face many challenges in recruiting CMs, but there is an acknowledgement that retention can be maximized through thoughtful recruitment.

Interviewing & Selection

- There is a variation among grassroots and government organizations on conducting formal background checks for potential CM candidates.

Offering

- Shadowing or having some form of trial period is one of the most valuable ways to understand how a CM fits in with an organization, as well provide prospective CMs with a better idea of expectations of the job. Shadowing can be seen as a bridge between the selection and offering processes.
- Although many smaller organizations currently do not have the funding to increase compensation for CMs, there is a desire and movement towards paying CMs higher wages and promoting them to leadership positions.
- CMs do not prioritize adequate compensation as a requirement for continuing to do this work. There is a culture of humility among CMs, which can contribute to avoiding discussion about monetary compensation.
- There are a number of formal and informal benefits that come with being a CM, which includes training opportunities, developing a sense of community, building a professional network, and receiving tools to foster healing.

Other Findings

- With the increased mainstream recognition of CM work, new organizations may disrupt the field by oversaturating it, stretching resources, and skewing collective interpretations of who is a CM.

Recommendations

Identification

- Increase and strengthen internal processes for demographic data collection.
- Increase consistent monitoring of outcomes and impact metrics related to CMs.
- Strive for field-wide consensus on the essential characteristics of a CM.

Attraction

- Prioritize clear expectation-setting, targeted job postings and multiple, diverse channels for attracting CMs.

Interviewing and Selection

- Conduct background checks and community vetting, tailored to the needs and capacity of the organization.

Offering

- Include shadowing and introductory periods in the onboarding process.
- Increase monetary compensation, formal benefits, and career growth opportunities.
- Fortify the culture of healing and growth-oriented skill-building.

Additional Recommendations

- Strengthen communication, networks and knowledge sharing across the field.
- Ensure balanced funding and program ownership between government entities and grassroots organizations.

The Credible Messenger movement has revitalized community building and mentorship between youth and community members re-entering their neighborhoods. There is no greater moment than now to develop strategic practices to expand the field and engage with the CMs who are propelling this movement forward. With the current momentum the grassroots, community-based movement is currently experiencing, it is equally important to recognize the following areas, outside of the scope of this report, for further consideration:

- Consider CM work as a springboard to professional opportunity.
- Investigate the risks and benefits of credentialing CM work.
- Explore avenues for public recognition of CMs.

Introduction

Credible Messenger mentoring³ is an evidence-based, proven model for addressing the increasingly challenging and pervasive issue of youth incarceration and violence within the United States. In a preview for their forthcoming report, “New York City’s Wounded Healers,” The Urban Institute defines Credible Messengers (CMs) as “individuals with lived experiences—frequently in the criminal justice system—who have transformed their lives and become agents of change in their communities.⁴ CMs leverage their lived experiences to deter others from destructive pathways by meaningfully engaging youth in the transformation of their own lives.⁵

Neighborhood Benches (NB)—a small, grassroots youth mentorship organization based in NYC’s Central Harlem and operating in Manhattan and the Bronx—commissioned the SIPA Capstone Team to report best practices for growing the CM field while maintaining its existing quality and community-developed practices. In doing so, the Capstone Team will highlight the invaluable work that CMs perform as mentors and agents of change. NB is devoted to educating young people from historically disadvantaged communities on leadership and transformative behavioral practices in order to break cycles of youth incarceration and violence. The organization does this by pairing “Credible Messenger mentors,” who leverage their lived experiences, to deter youth from paths leading to incarceration or violence.

“‘Credibility’ comes from the lived experience, while a ‘messenger’ is someone who can effectively share those experiences.”

- Shams DaBaron “Da Homeless Hero”, Credible Messenger, Neighborhood Benches

CMs are individuals with lived experiences in many different types of systems—criminal justice, primarily, but also the shelter system, the foster care system, the mental health system, addiction services, and more. CMs draw upon their experiences to offer guidance, motivate changed behavior, and catalyze healing for others, of any age. However, due to a dearth of information on CM work outside of CMs as youth mentors, the predominance of CM mentoring among organizations the Team spoke with, and the youth mentoring mission of NB—the Team’s client—the Team has opted for a narrower scope of CM work to act as the foundation for our research and analysis: systems-impacted CMs as mentors for youth at-risk of violence or incarceration.⁶

³ “Credible Messenger mentoring” hereinafter referred to in shorthand as “Credible Messenger work” with “Credible Messenger” and “youth,” or “mentor” and “mentee” actors. However, in practice, not all CMs are mentors and not all youth are mentees; this is program specific.

⁴ Martinez et al., “New York City’s Wounded Healers.”

⁵ See Appendix 1: Definition of Terms; youth refers to individuals ages 15–24.

⁶ “Youth at-risk of incarceration” will also be referred to as “systems involvement”; systems-impacted refers to an individual who is legally, economically, or familially affected in a negative way by the criminal justice system; see Appendix 1: Definition on Terms.

In recent years, the precipitous rises in gun violence and incarceration in the United States have paved the way for a rapid expansion of the CM movement. New York City (NYC) is among the jurisdictions recognizing the potential impacts of investing in CMs. In a February 2022 announcement of increased City government support for Credible Messenger programs, NYC Mayor Adams described the cycle of youth incarceration as “If you go up and do a bid, do time, upstate or in Rikers, and you come back to the same conditions, it's a setup.”⁷ The Mayor highlights the deeply entrenched structural issues that prevent youth that are systems-involved or at-risk for systems involvement to alter their paths and improve their life circumstances. These issues are not only persistent, but also pervasive. Across the United States, over a half a million individuals were arrested in the year 2019.⁸ In NYC alone in 2018 over 3,000 individuals under the age of 16 were arrested.⁹ A total of 93% of the youth arrested in NYC are people of color.¹⁰ In addition to facing higher rates of poverty, poor health outcomes, and structural racism, communities of color lose children to the criminal justice system at far higher rates than other communities.¹¹ The Mayor has demonstrated a greater awareness of CM work, revealing that every individual under 21 years of age that is currently on probation will be paired with a CM mentor.¹²

The CM community offers the opportunity to provide much needed leadership development, workforce training, and mental health support to individuals that are systems-impacted. In New York State over 91,000 individuals are incarcerated while at least 267,000 cycle through local jails. Individuals identifying as Black are significantly overrepresented in this population making up 53% of the incarcerated population, while consisting of only 16% of the State’s total population.¹³ Compounding this issue is lower educational attainment and employment outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals. Nationally, formerly incarcerated individuals are twice as likely to not have a high school credential and eight times more likely to not have graduated from college. These significant educational disparities and stigma facing those with systems involvement has translated to significantly lower employment outcomes¹⁴ and a staggering 27% unemployment rate.¹⁵

Having internalized the trauma of incarceration, formerly incarcerated people also often return to society with higher rates of mental health issues in addition to experiencing barriers to employment and education. Roughly 14% of individuals incarcerated in state and federal prisons met the threshold for serious psychological distress, while between 37% to 44% of jail inmates

⁷ Feldman Ephraim, “Adams Expands Mentor Program for Youth on Probation.”

⁸ Puzanchera, “Juvenile Arrests, 2019.”

⁹ “Juvenile Arrests (Under 16 Years).”

¹⁰ Martinez, “Youth Arrests Decrease in NYC but Racial Disparities Persist.”

¹¹ Rovner, “Black Disparities in Youth Incarceration.”

¹² Feldman Ephraim, “Adams Expands Mentor Program for Youth on Probation.”

¹³ New York Profile, Prison Policy Initiative.

¹⁴ Wong and Bertram, “New Data on Formerly Incarcerated People’s Employment Reveal Labor Market Injustices.”

¹⁵ Couloute, “Getting Back on Course.”

were told that they had a mental health disorder in the past. Without access to adequate health services, these issues often remain unaddressed and are bound to worsen.¹⁶

Evidence-based results of CM programs ameliorating the damage wrought by the criminal justice system span the past two decades. Immense interest from the philanthropic, government, and justice communities is leading to the creation and funding of new programs that center on CMs. However, the Team's research highlights the paucity of information available for these organizations to effectively recruit and identify CM mentors.

“People often come to us asking about the programs and to quantify the impact, but never about the people doing the work. You need to look under the hood and examine the engine to really understand the Credible Messengers and their work as the mission.”

- Rev. Maurice Winley, Executive Director, Living Redemption

Research on youth mentoring programs highlights the importance of a quality match between mentor and mentee. In order to maximize the overall impact of mentorship, matches should be personalized and long-term.¹⁷ It follows that there is an urgent need to prioritize retention among CMs to ensure the most favorable program outcomes. To do so, the CM movement needs to build a firm foundation of workforce development practices, especially for CM recruitment, to ensure that individuals entering the field as CMs are effectively selected and matched to relevant opportunities. Developing strategic recruitment practices will allow organizations in the field to facilitate long-term commitments from their CMs and maximize the impact of their programs on participants *and* CMs themselves.

For these reasons, more research into the creation, implementation and staffing of CM programs is necessary as funders seek to allocate resources to CM work and new organizations enter the space in order to maintain the quality of the field as it grows. In addition, a focus on the CMs themselves would provide an opportunity to better understand strategies for supporting these individuals in their healing from trauma they may have experienced due to systems-involvement.

The timing of this report presents the SIPA Capstone Team with the unique opportunity to develop a comprehensive set of recommendations for fortifying the workforce development foundation of the CM movement at a time when the field is poised for rapid growth. This report aims to contribute to the conversation and aid the movement as it strives to effectively stop the revolving door of youth incarceration.

¹⁶ Russ N. et al., “Prison And Jail Reentry And Health | Health Affairs Brief.”

¹⁷ Garringer et al., “Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring Research-Informed and Practitioner-Approved Best Practices For Creating and Sustaining Impactful Mentoring Relationships and Strong Program Services”; Stukas, Clary, and Snyder, “Mentor Recruitment and Retention”; Cespedes, “Evidence-Based Practices at a New York City Youth Justice Services Organization.”

Project Scope

This report aims to share a collection of promising recruitment practices being utilized at the grassroots and government levels of the CM movement and make recommendations in the interest of further strengthening the quality of the CM workforce as the field expands. In addition, and with equal importance, it attempts to increase the visibility of the CM movement to diverse audiences. By leaning into the CM community, and through the generosity—in word and in spirit—of its members, the Team has honed an understanding of the CM movement and the people who are whole-heartedly devoted to its mission.

The Team’s journey of understanding began with our client, Neighborhood Benches. As a proud player in the field, the organization has a vested interest in ensuring the continued success of the CM movement and the preservation of the organic, community-centered nature of the CM practices active at the grassroots level. NB Founder, William M. Evans (hereinafter referred to as “Evans”), engaged the Capstone Team to develop a collection of promising practices for recruiting CMs to support NB in creating a hub of information on CM work, enabling interested parties to replicate fruitful, community-based applications.

Immediately following the engagement, the Team developed an awareness of the history of the CM movement, its impacts, and the ecosystem of nonprofit and governmental organizations that are engaged in the work, largely focusing on work occurring in NYC. Lengthy discussions with NB provided a window into the CM community and a lens through which the Team could begin to evaluate recruitment practices across CM organizations. NB graciously referred the Team to other relevant actors in the NYC CM ecosystem. Referrals culminated in 30 interviews with nonprofit, government, philanthropic, community, and individual stakeholders. These interviews shed light on the various systems and practices of, but also the challenges facing, organizations doing CM work during this pivotal moment in the movement’s history.

The SIPA Capstone Team is simply a vehicle by which the diverse ecosystem of CMs in NYC is being heard, their stories amplified, and their field galvanized for long-term success. This report endeavors to bring every reader along on a journey of discovery and understanding of the city’s vibrant CM community.

The audiences for this report include in no particular order:

- Community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who are seeking to employ CMs
- Government organizations and affiliates who are seeking to employ CMs or who are contracting with organizations that employ CMs
- Neighborhood Benches who seeks to engage the broader CM ecosystem around greater awareness and cohesion on issues impacting the quality and expansion of the CM community
- All relevant stakeholders to CM work, including individuals who identify as CMs

The following sections will briefly describe the approach by which the Team's was able to engage the intended audiences; offer brief overviews of the history of CM work, the importance of supporting the efficacy of CM work, and NB's recruitment process; evolve the team's initial lens for evaluating promising recruitment practices with a thorough review of available literature; apply the lens to determine a set of findings; and, finally, offer a collection of recommendations before concluding with further considerations.

The Approach

The Team's approach was designed to reflect the existing practices within the field that have been developed at the grassroots level. In addition, the Team's findings and recommendations were developed in an effort to maintain the quality of the CM workforce in this moment of growth. It is focused on highlighting the often unrecognized work of CMs themselves. To accomplish this, the Team developed Guiding Principles through structured interviews with the client, which are detailed below. These principles informed the Team's approach, as well as its analysis on CM recruitment practices.

The Team constructed non-overlapping definitions for the four phases of recruitment—"identification," "attraction," "interviewing & selection," and "offering"—as these terms are used interchangeably by interviewees and in the literature. Its findings and recommendations are structured under these four categories.

Finally, this section includes a summary of the Team's research methodology, which was conducted over four Phases through structured interviews, secondary research, and an online survey instrument.¹⁸ A technical methodology can be found in Appendix 7.

Guiding principles

In order to determine a fitting collection of promising practices to inform findings and recommendations, the Team worked with NB to flesh out and prioritize a list of six guiding principles for CM mentors at NB and the work they do. These principles helped to inform the lens by which the Team examined recruitment practices from other CM organizations and identified in the literature:

- **Inclusivity** of directly or indirectly systems-impacted individuals in meaningful work and the creation of programming and an environment that serves the needs and interests of both the CMs and the communities they serve.
- Commitment to **understanding** the needs of the community and the CMs: meeting CMs where they are in terms of the care, support and training they need, and allowing them to have ownership over their experience, self-discovery, and growth.

¹⁸ See Appendix 5: Credible Messenger Survey Questions.

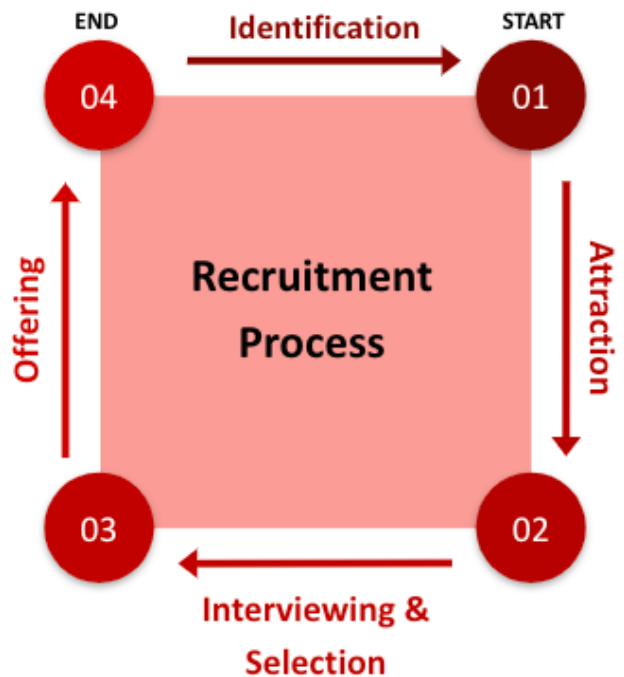
- Seeing CMs as potentially trauma-impacted individuals who deserve opportunities to **heal**; healing as an integral first step to improving responsiveness to triggers and becoming better mentors.
- **Practice-based evidence** as a commitment to learning-by-doing. Adopting methods that are borne and solidified from evidence of their practices’ effectiveness with the individuals in the communities it serves.
- **Place-based programming** that is tailored to the specific needs and features of the community and is designed and operated by individuals from the community.
- CMs should be **diverse** and reflective of the communities they serve so that mentees and community members feel represented by those in influential positions.



Phases of Recruitment

For the purposes of this report, recruitment includes four stages: identification, attraction, interviewing & selection, and offering. The following defines each of these recruitment phases:

- **“Identification,”** in the context of this report, pertains to the individual characteristics of “credible” mentors. It seeks to answer the question, “Who is the CM?” Topics include desired skills and traits for CM positions as well as their motivation, whether they are validated by the community, and if they are based in the community.
- **“Attraction”** refers to processes by which an organization advertises and solicits interest and applications from individuals for volunteer, part-time, or full-time CM positions. It also includes the methods by which organizations bring potential messengers into the field and job descriptions for CM positions, including what sticks out for the employer and for the CM.



- **“Interviewing & Selection”** are the processes by which organizations choose candidates and match applicants to the requirements of individual opportunities. Understanding that the processes of interviewing and selection are often intertwined, the Team has combined these two components in our research and analyses.
- **“Offering”** includes making an engagement offer to a CM (hiring), the employment terms of individual positions, benefits, and, for most organizations, probationary or “shadowing” periods.¹⁹

Research Approach

The Team relied on first-person interviews and secondary research to surface findings and recommendations for recruiting CMs through four phases and for detailing the experiences of CMs themselves. Two facets of discussion around CM mentoring were evident at the outset of the research. First, the term “Credible Messenger” was used interchangeably with a number of other terms, such as “Transformative Mentor,” and was applied in a multitude of contexts. Second, the field had been largely led as a grassroots effort by community-based organizations with an increasing number of government organizations that are utilizing CMs. Interviews with these organizations, including NB, brought forward the many shared practices that have been communally developed. Similarly, conversations with individual CMs surfaced the diversity of experiences that CMs bring to the work, their motivations, and first-person narratives about the individuals directly impacted by their work. The Team’s methodology reflects its journey from building a foundational understanding of the current state of the community and efforts to respectively reflect the practices within the community that have led to its successes.²⁰

In **Phase 1** the Team endeavored to build a baseline understanding of the context surrounding CM mentoring and to narrow the scope of research. It also sought to differentiate this space from others such as the CURE Violence movement, which is a model that relies on a public health framework to reduce gun violence.²¹ In an effort to analyze literature relevant to the field the Team ran terms synonyms to “Credible Messenger” through scholarly databases, reviewed evaluations of pillar programs within the CM space, and drew on key literature pertaining to youth mentoring and volunteering. The Literature Review conducted in Phase 1 provided a scholarly basis for findings and recommendations with regard to the identification, attracting, interviewing & selection, and offering stages of the CM recruitment process.

Phases 2, 3, and 4 were dedicated to structured interviews with NB, organizations with CMs, CMs themselves, and stakeholder groups. The Team conducted 30 interviews with 17 organizations during the research period.²² This effort was intended to surface the groundswell of community-based practices that had developed within the field over time. As outside researchers, the interviews and the findings that were generated by the interviews sought to

¹⁹ Some organizations, like NB, require a shadowing period before hiring.

²⁰ See Appendix 7: Technical Methodology.

²¹ Butts et al., “CURE Violence: A Public Health Model to Reduce Gun Violence.”

²² See Appendix 4: Interview Questions.

accurately and respectively reflect back the insights that were shared by the community. Interview questions for each phase can be found in Appendix 4.

During **Phase 2**, the Team conducted three structured interviews with NB to create a baseline understanding of the organization and its practices. These sessions focused on developing a map of NB's existing programs, and its strategies for recruiting CMs in each part of the recruitment cycle. The Team's conversations with NB provided much needed background on context and potential impact of CM work. In addition, it helped provide a frame by which to understand work being done more broadly in the field.

Structured interviews with organizations in the field and with CMs themselves in **Phase 3** revealed a community of practice surrounding CM work and shared experiences between CMs. The Team asked organizations about their CMs, how they attracted CMs, and for potential opportunities and challenges for the field. These conversations surfaced a community of practice and norms that existed between and among organizations. Case studies for interviewed organizations can be found in Appendix 8.

In addition, the Team surfaced insights from CMs through structured interviews, a focus group, and a digital survey instrument. Institutional Review Board considerations were taken into account when working with CMs. The Team's conversations with CMs revealed the many personal benefits and challenges related to CM work. It also demonstrated an existing gap in research on the experiences of CMs themselves. The digital survey instrument can be found in Appendix 5.

In **Phase 4** the Team concluded its research by conducting structured interviews with stakeholders.²³ Similar to Phase 3, interviewees were selected through snowball sampling with the goal of capturing insights for how government and actors within the education and criminal justice spaces interact with CM work. The findings from these interviews allowed the Team to build a more robust set of findings that speak to the cross-sectoral needs of relevant stakeholders.

The next section provides a deeper introduction to the CM community, its history, and the existing ecosystem.

²³ See Appendices 2 and 3.

Introduction to Credible Messenger Work

History

In an increasingly technological and independent world, many U.S. neighborhoods have or are losing tight-knit community dynamics that have protected and nurtured youth. The image of youth congregating on brownstone steps or rowdy teenagers being scolded by community members is an illustration of both a natural collective accountability and community bond that faded by the late 1980s and 1990s.²⁴ However, among the merits of CM work is the effort to recreate an organic sense of community through mentorship, reintegration, and self-transformation.

CM work was developed from the need to prevent youth from entering the cycle of incarceration. The term, “Credible Messenger” was first used by Black Panther Eddie Ellis to describe himself. Ellis had been incarcerated in New York State’s Green Haven Prison in the 1980s.²⁵ A CM, thus, was originally a person returning from jail or prison who could provide mentorship to youth destined for a similar path. Common to the experience of returning to one’s neighborhood, particularly among ex-inmates who would become involved in the community, was a spiritual or religious transformation that sparked an “evangelical zeal to save others.”²⁶ The motivations of individuals entering CM work were and still continue to be rooted in a deep desire to improve oneself, spread the word of changed behavior (in addition to displaying this changed behavior), and sharing wisdom to benefit others.

Though the origin story of the term “Credible Messenger” harkens back to involvement with the criminal justice system, the term has since evolved to include impact from any system. In certain organizations, “Credible Messenger” is interchangeable with “transformative mentor,” “CM mentor,” “neighborhood leader,” etc.; each term describes a similar type of individual, but has been adjusted to suit the nature of each organization’s unique approach to CM work. Moreover, the term CM has multiple layered meanings. Credible refers to one’s experience as it is applicable to their role in an organization as well as their applicable lived experience. Messenger refers to one’s ability to deliver a message about their lived experience and other relevant messages about change and positivity that comes with being a transformed or changed individual. Finally, CM can also be attached to the word “mentor;” however, not every CM has the skills or training to be a mentor, which requires skill building, empathy, and communication skills amongst other traits. At times, the term “mentor” is used in spaces where an older CM works with youth, so in addition to the skills a CM would need, a CM mentor may typically also need to learn how to work with youth.²⁷

²⁴ Focus group of Credible Messengers associated with Neighborhood Benches in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

²⁵ Austria and Peterson, “Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth.”

²⁶ Austria and Peterson.

²⁷ Focus group of Credible Messengers associated with Neighborhood Benches in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

While “Credible Messenger” has been used for the past forty years, the CM movement can only be dated back to the early 1990s. During that time, a community movement arose amidst the crack epidemic, by faith and neighborhood leaders, to prevent crime by connecting youth with often formerly incarcerated neighborhood leaders. Groups across the U.S., such as the Mentoring Center in Oakland, California and Friends of Island Academy in NYC, began to mobilize CMs “to engage young people at highest risk for crime, violence, and incarceration.”²⁸

In 2002, the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Ford Foundation supported the Public/Private Venture’s launch of the National Faith-Based Initiative for High Risk Youth, a research project intent on promoting CM work.²⁹ However, it was actually the public health “CURE Violence” or “Ceasefire” model that would propel CM work outside of the U.S. and jumpstart replicating the movement.

The CURE Violence model emphasizes street outreach and crisis response prevention to identify and disrupt violent conflict, work with high-risk individuals, and mobilize positive community norms.³⁰ CURE Violence, founded by Gary Slutkin, M.D., was launched in West Garfield Park, Chicago in an attempt to reduce its cycle of high rates of violence. Despite “CURE Violence’s” emphasis on gun violence, it has set a precedent for CM organizations, like NB, in two ways: (1) helping high-risk individuals unlearn the trauma of street survival tactics, and (2) training CMs to mitigate conflict and build community based on their lived experiences and skills. As of December 2015, the CURE Violence model was implemented in over 23 sites in the U.S. and globally.³¹

About a decade after the launch of CURE Violence, CM work began regaining recognition in New York City. In 2012, the NYC Department of Probation created the Arches program, a CM program which aims to help youth ages 16 to 24 overcome “thought processes that may have led to violence or crime in the past [that] can stand in the way of finding a job, finishing school or peacefully resolving conflict today.”³² Unlike CURE Violence, which offers support to help gun violence victims receive medical assistance and in-field violence interruption, Arches focuses primarily on family-style support while following an evidence-based curriculum.

CM work has gained traction within the current NYC Mayoral administration. Mayor Adams has demonstrated commitment to investing in CM work, revealing in February 2022 that every individual under 21 years of age, currently on probation will be paired with a CM mentor.³³ Along with local government support, philanthropic entities like The Annie E. Casey Foundation, with the mission to address injustices within the U.S. criminal justice system, are also increasing

²⁸ Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth

²⁹ Austria and Peterson, “Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth.”

³⁰ Austria and Peterson.

³¹ ‘Where We Work’. CURE Violence, <https://cvg.org/where-we-work/>. Accessed 4 May 2022.

³² Arches - Probation. <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/probation/services/arches.page>. Accessed 4 May 2022.

³³ Feldman Ephraim, “Adams Expands Mentor Program for Youth on Probation.”

their support for CM work.³⁴ As the field gains greater mainstream visibility, it is expected that CM organizations will receive increased public, private, and government support.

The CM movement is poised for growth. There is no better time than now to increase visibility of the movement, fortify existing practices, and strengthen collaboration among CMs and those organizations within and those hoping to enter the field. The following section provides context for the current relationship dynamics which exist between organizations which occupy the CM ecosystem in NYC.

Ecosystem

“We [are] grassroots... we’re like a guppy swimming with whales and dolphins and sharks, but we are swimming.”

- Antonio Hendrickson, Founder, Lead by Example/Reverse the Trend

The CM field, particularly in New York City, is as vast as it is compact. The CM ecosystem is home to a wide array of stakeholders, from CM and re-entry organizations to elected officials and philanthropic entities. Each stakeholder plays a crucial role in an intricate web of support for CM organizations and their CMs, including funding, training, re-entry support, and career development.³⁵ These groups are deeply invested in collaboration and idea exchange as a method of strengthening the impact of their shared mission: reducing violence and incarceration rates. However, as the field grows, so does the potential for tension among organizations doing CM work.

Currently, the CM ecosystem in NYC is populated by programs from two sectors: government-funded and nonprofit. Government funded programs, like Arches, are overseen by city agencies and rely heavily on structured processes and documentation. In NYC, other nonprofit organizations are almost entirely grassroots, community-based organizations, which are commonly more informal and value the organic nature of their practices. The difference in the organizational structure of government and grassroots organizations extends outside of programming and to their methods of compensation.

Compensation for CM work has leaned more towards advertising informal benefits, like community and peer accountability, because the work has, historically, been primarily volunteer or part-time. Distinctive to the CM role is that it is not structured as a “9 to 5” job, and CMs are often “on-call” 24/7. Despite these demands for availability, many CMs may find themselves juggling multiple jobs. The rate of financial compensation for some CM opportunities may not match the rigor of the work.

³⁴ The Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Casey Supports National Effort to Grow Credible Messenger Mentoring.”

³⁵ See Appendix 2: Stakeholder Groups; a list of stakeholders and their respective roles in the CM space is provided.

Although the CM ecosystem is collaborative, organizations often compete for funding. Government funded organizations with more formal structures and greater data collection capacity typically have greater success in obtaining funding, as government or philanthropic funders often have strict requirements, such as program data or job descriptions, which may exclude grassroots organizations that function more organically and informally. The City’s Arches program, for example, has been funded both by a Bloomberg Philanthropies organization and the New York City government.

The CM movement is at a critical juncture. The field is poised to expand rapidly, but there remains a concern that—without shared funding, values, and practices—the movement will bifurcate into formal and informal, government and grassroots CM fields. Programs within each sector have much to gain from collaboration. By sharing and adapting promising practices between government funded and grassroots nonprofit CM programs, the movement can move forward together rather than separately, maximizing the impact of the mission on participants and CMs and fortifying the movement’s foundation.

Community leaders, like Evans at NB, recognize the importance of intentional collaboration between the grassroots CM sphere and the government sphere. The following section delves into the origin story and mission of NB and discusses the organization’s programs. Finally, in order to encourage government, nonprofit, and grassroots organizations to share and adopt promising practices, the NB History Section will close with a brief case study on NB’s organizational recruitment strategies broken up into four areas: identification, attraction, interviewing and selection, and offering a position.



Neighborhood Benches

The client, Neighborhood Benches, was the starting point for the Team’s deep dive into the current recruitment practices among CM organizations. Although one player in the ecosystem, NB and its community provided the Team with a window into the city’s CM ecosystem and provided a formative lens by which to examine other organization’s methods. Below, the Team offers a truncated overview of NB’s history, mission, programming, CM community, and recruitment practices as an opening case study on grassroots CM work in NYC.

History

Six years ago, NB Founder William M. Evans approached his lifelong family friend Daniel Barber—the President of the NYCHA Andrew Jackson Houses Resident Association in the South Bronx—with an outline of what was to become NB. Evans was hoping to design an organization which could be the vehicle for catalyzing systematic changes to cycles of violence, incarceration, and poverty on both the community and city levels, starting at the Jackson Houses, his childhood home.

The organization came to be predicated upon the restorative and transformative dialogues that could happen on neighborhood benches. To Evans, the benches were where many an elder or community leader sat and engaged kids from the projects on whatever was weighing on their minds and hearts. Issues ranged from violence and crime to mental health or the illness of a family member. These informal mentor-mentee relationships were the inspiration for the work the organization would begin.

“I had lost my mother, my father was incarcerated, my siblings were having trouble...the only place where I felt I could unpack and do no harm were the neighborhood benches.”

- William M. Evans, Founder & President, Neighborhood Benches

Initially, Evans designed a pilot project, specifically for public housing developments, focused on community clean-up, advocacy planning, and group mentoring for the adults and young people in the community. Eventually, Evans would work with community members to locate neighborhood leaders, and then encourage and prepare them to become CMs poised to work with at-risk and disconnected youth. At the beginning, the organization had four CMs and three clear goals:

1. Building and maintaining positive relationships between young people and caring adults in their community.
2. Improving and sustaining a safe physical environment in communities and creating spaces to strengthen social relationships.
3. Changing societal norms about the acceptability of violence and willingness to intervene.

Evans chose to begin NB at public housing developments in NYC because—in contrast to the rest of the city—the developments are patrolled by Public Service Area (PSA) police precincts, not the traditional New York Police Departments Precincts. This allowed NB to build a different relationship with the police and community, and have access to neighborhood-specific data (arrest, crimes, etc.), enabling NB to determine how it could best maximize its impact.

Now, six years later, NB has replicated this program at 15 housing developments, worked with 52 volunteer CMs, located and trained over 25 CM mentors, and mentors over 100 youth per year. The organization is overseen by Evans and two directors, all three of whom are CMs themselves. The leadership of the organization is intentionally designed to be as descriptively representative as possible of the communities it serves with black, Spanish-speaking, and LGBTQ+ CMs in leadership positions—all of whom grew up in public housing situated in the communities they now serve. Demographically, all of the CMs associated with NB are black or black-passing, a majority are male, and they are all over 24 years old; each of them identifies as having been systems-impacted.

At NB, CMs support program development by gathering information on the needs of young people and the community as a whole, then help design programming to keep the community safe. Through partnerships with NYCHA Tenant Associations and local colleges and universities, NB is currently operating three formal programs across Upper Manhattan and the Bronx: the Leaders Leadership League, the Neighborhood Schooling-Teaching Practicum, and Designing Your Future.

Leaders Leadership League

The Leaders Leadership League (LLL) is described as NB's "ground level" Leadership Development and Mentorship program. The LLL enrolls justice-impacted community members in a 13-month cohort-based training course to become CMs. The program has three training categories—mentorship, leadership, and organizational—all of which involve different skill development trainings on topics including Community Familiarity and Awareness, Identity Awareness, Leadership Identity Development, Motivational Speaking, Community Service, and Restorative Justice. Following the course, CMs receive a certificate of completion and ongoing, volunteer placements with NB as speakers, mentors, or facilitators.

The Neighborhood Schooling-Teaching Practicum

The Neighborhood Schooling-Teaching Practicum for Developing Mentors (NSTP-DM) is a city-wide, year-round educational program for developing CM mentors. This programming happens in two parts. First, the NSTP-DM connects CMs with city universities and CM training facilities where they can access opportunities to improve their cognitive skills, adapt tools for transforming communities, and obtain internship placements. Then, at participating colleges and universities, courses and experiential learning opportunities are designed, in collaboration with CMs, to facilitate curriculum-integrated, experiential learning opportunities for traditional students' about the communities they inhabit while enrolled. Participating colleges and universities are spread out around the country. The list of partner institutions where courses are

collaboratively designed and/or interns are from or NB CM students are sent includes Columbia University Business School, Columbia University SIPA Claremont McKenna College, CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy, Lehman College, The New School, Yeshiva University, Macalester College, the University of North Carolina, Stanford University, Greensboro College, and Fordham University.

Designing Your Future

In 2021, NB launched “Designing Your Future”—to teach young people how to model changed behaviors using fashion. NB enlists local artists and designers to instruct students on how to operate relevant tools (e.g., embroidery machinery), design clothing, and incorporate effective messaging into their work. The program takes seven students at a time and takes place at the NB storefront office in Harlem.

In addition to these three formal programs, NB works with the City’s Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and holds community outreach events. The SYEP offers paid summer employment opportunities to NYC youth ages 14 to 24 through local partner organizations, like NB. In its first year, NB took 172 young people and placed them at the Andrew Jackson Houses to engage in neighborhood improvement projects. NB’s community outreach events are diverse and highly responsive to the needs of the communities across Upper Manhattan and the Bronx. Events range from food pantries and food distribution to community clean-up and beautification, and, more recently, COVID-19 personal protective equipment and test distribution.

Everything NB does—from programming to practice—is designed to align with its unique, and powerful set of values: **inclusivity, diversity, understanding, healing, practice-based evidence, and place-based programming**. Underlining all of it is a deeply-rooted desire to craft, empower, and uplift CMs.

Recruitment Practices

The following sections will provide abbreviated insights into NB’s current recruitment process, starting with identification of the CM and closing with making an engagement offer.

Identification

NB has a simple approach: plant yourself in neighborhoods where harm exists, start working to gain a better understanding of the people and issues that exist there, and use that knowledge and the power of the community to identify CMs. This is a restorative, place-based approach toward programming that is replicated within each neighborhood NB serves.

NB looks for CM candidates who have “made a difference,” and seeks to recruit them to create long-lasting changes to improve the quality of life in their communities. For Evans, understanding the culture of his “hood” meant he is able to easily identify individuals that contributed to the creation of community or steered others away from violence and crime. He

draws on this knowledge to recruit leaders that can have a tremendous impact on youth as CMs.

For NB, lived experience and a willingness to do the work are the most desirable traits in a potential CM; everything else can be taught.

“As long as a potential CM candidate has the lived experience, Neighborhood Benches can provide them with the additional skills they need to do the work.”

- William M. Evans, Founder & President, Neighborhood Benches

NB looks for individuals who have taken on a leadership role in the community. Leadership can look as insular as doing a home visit for a student struggling in school or as broad as an investment in community development. These leaders can take many forms—pastors, shop owners, coaches, hair stylists, and reformed gang members—but must be *credible*.

Credibility is the keystone characteristic for any CM. Barber put it simply; being credible means “saying what you mean and meaning what you say, then knowing people will listen.”³⁶ At the most fundamental level, a “credible” messenger is an individual who is recognized and respected by their community, knowledgeable of its happenings, truthful, steadfast, and who carries themselves with purpose, hoping to deliver messages of healing, transformation, and growth. Community validation, according to NB, includes both being from the community and being respected and vetted by the community.

Attraction

“Untapped” CMs exist throughout NYC and are doing other things—driving school buses or coaching neighborhood basketball teams—all in the name of giving back, lending a hand, and sharing oneself with the community.

At its inception, NB’s strategies for attracting these “untapped” individuals to the CM field began with hanging flyers in local community gathering places—the Jackson Houses’ entryways, the local Chinese restaurant, bodega, and laundromat—with the goal of attracting community members to meetings and sparking interest in the organization’s mission. According to Barber, “William would set up workshops in the development and tell residents to ‘come through.’ People would just show up to situations and conversations, and depending on how they showed up, they could be tapped as a CM on the day.”³⁷

³⁶ Daniel Barber (President, Andrew Jackson Houses Resident Association), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

³⁷ Daniel Barber (President, Andrew Jackson Houses Resident Association), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

Now, NB does not need to invest time in attracting CMs because it has established itself within the communities it serves. All of NB recruitment happens through word-of-mouth and “tapping” through a network of partners and community members. Hundreds of referrals have come from its NYCHA Tenant Association partners as well as individual community members. These sources see CM recruits modeling changed behavior in the streets of the neighborhoods and can recognize their potential.

Interviewing & Selection

Because of the success of its existing referral process, NB does not currently invest in a formal application process. How, then, does NB determine who is a “good fit” for the organization?

Individuals who are referred to be CMs with NB engage in a series of informal conversations with NB Directors and volunteers and undergo a shadowing period to ascertain fit (in the role, the community, and NB) and establish a greater understanding of the role and its responsibilities. This shadowing period is a crucial aspect of NB’s selection process; it allows the potential CM to begin learning from current NB volunteers and making a positive impact on their community.

“You are taught in an indirect manner and you learn by seeing the phases... There is no curriculum to teach someone. After a situation takes place, there will be a conversation about what [the CM] witness[es] and [an opportunity to] develop strategies for approaching things in the future.”

- Daniel Osario, Director, Neighborhood Benches

At NB, there is no official timeline for shadowing; it is, another, organic process of continued learning and reflection, only finished when NB and the CM feels ready to “walk on their own”.

Getting to “walking on their own” can sometimes be a complex process. Many CMs carry significant trauma from their experiences with the criminal justice system. NB is aware of the potential for CMs to be retraumatized through potentially returning to sites of trauma or re-living experiences through their work with youth. The NB recruitment process does not include a formal psychological evaluation, but rather, enables CMs to self-identify their wounds and areas for growth. Through a series of trainings, NB provides CMs with the tools to identify their trauma (e.g., mindfulness) and attempts to accommodate CMs with ample, unwavering emotional support.

Sometimes NB may decide that a referred individual is not well-suited to be one of its CMs. Reasons for this conclusion are various: a mismatch in individual motivations and NB’s mission, a failure to receive community validation, a failure to model changed behavior, or certain technical restrictions outlined below.

Community validation plays a key role in ensuring a good match. As Barber put it, “The street is your background check; it will tell you everything you need to know.” The “street background check” is the predominant tool NB relies upon to determine if a potential CM mentor is a safe bet. According to NB, in most cases, there is no need for a formal background check; the community is prepared and willing to divulge accurate information on any individual's official (or unofficial) history with the criminal justice system. However, given the sensitivity of some of NB's programs—especially those where CMs are directly interacting with youth—if the community is unable to confirm that a potential CM is clear of any charges relating to the mistreatment of minors, NB will perform an official background check before putting them in a room with youth participants.

Other technical violations that may prohibit an individual from becoming a NB CM include: recent violent or harmful activity associated with gang affiliation or probation. Gang affiliation itself is not considered a prohibiting factor for recruitment; the deciding factors are who you are and how you are involved. In other words, if you are failing to model desirable behavior, you will be removed from the recruitment process.

For those individuals that pass through the interviewing and selection process, NB will train and match them to a community program that best suits their interests and strengths. NB will train CMs who are actively on probation before referring them to other organizations seeking entry-level CMs. Additionally, there are also individuals who approach NB seeking guidance and the training to prepare themselves to start another organization or non-affiliated community program.

Offering

Currently, NB is engaging ten active CMs. Of the seven CMs, three are in leadership positions—Evans as Founder and President, and Daniel Osario and Rena Brown as Directors. All of the CMs are engaged on a voluntary basis and each creates their own schedule aligned with the programs offered. However, due to the organic and responsive nature of the work it is commonly understood that a CM's hours are 24/7.

Payment rates for active CMs “are determined based upon hours.” Each active CM is eligible to receive a weekly stipend which “rang[es] from \$175-425.”³⁸ The approximate hourly wage rate for a CM in a Directorship position at NB is \$35. CMs can also receive a one-time stipend of \$150 for recruiting five youths to participate in NB focus groups where information is gathered on the needs of the community.

It is imperative to note that, in any given year, NB's funding has never exceeded \$190,000.³⁹ All compensation is afforded from a small purse relative to other larger or government-associated CM organizations.

³⁸ William M. Evans (Founder & President, Neighborhood Benches), in discussion with the authors, March 2022.

³⁹ William M. Evans (Founder & President, Neighborhood Benches), in discussion with the authors, May 2022.

As volunteers, NB CMs do not receive commonplace formal benefits, like healthcare, parental leave, or paid time off. However, owing to the holistic and community-based nature of CM work, CMs at NB are met with a plethora of skills trainings in addition to informal benefits. The informal benefits include mentorship between CMs, a sense of community within the organization, and opportunities to heal from trauma.

At NB, both internal and external trainings are available. External trainings are plentiful and are offered in partnership with the Credible Messenger Justice Center and the New School's Institute for Transformative Mentoring. As aforementioned, skills trainings include trauma-informed care and healing—an integral component of re-entry from incarceration (where applicable) and successful CM mentoring—restorative justice, professional development, community navigation, and adolescent cognition, among others.

Additionally, each NB CM member is provided with a job title that is both fit for them and worthy of securing employment outside of NB (e.g., Director, Program Manager, etc.). From start to finish, there is this level of intentionality in the NB CM recruitment process.

While the organization's programs are to serve communities, its practices stand equally to serve its CMs. By investing in the CM, NB is both empowering the individual to heal, grow, and succeed in all endeavors—present and future—and strengthening program outcomes for the benefit of each community it serves.

“We identify these people who have the potential to lead, show them the highlights of how to be powerful and transfer marketable skills. The vehicle is the programs with the kids, but the aim is to serve vulnerable, returning community members who want to affect change.”

- William M. Evans, Founder & President, Neighborhood Benches

Conclusion

The exploration of NB's recruitment process reveals a grounding in the organic, community-based practices common to grassroots CM organizations, predominantly an exclusive reliance on its networks to identify, vet, and select potential CMs.

NB provided the initial lens for the Team to begin to examine recruitment practices across organizations in the CM ecosystem. The following section of the report offers a thorough review of existing literature relevant to the recruitment and application of CMs across several fields. The information gathered in the review serves to further develop the Team's lens for evaluating recruitment methods for CMs.

Literature Review

Introduction

This section will review literature on the emerging field of CM work that informed, in combination with the Team's study of NB, the basis of the Team's analysis of the CM field. It focused on studies that were within NYC due to the city's robust ecosystem of diverse organizations working in areas directly or indirectly related to CM work. This review will also feature literature from the larger field of youth mentoring to contextualize CM practices in the CM field overall. The Literature Review is organized using the four phases of recruitment as categories.

This Literature Review found gaps in research on the creation and implementation of CM programs.⁴⁰ For the most part, the literature focused on evaluating and identifying the outcomes of existing or potential programs on preventing youth incarceration and violence. This finding was not surprising as the field is still developing, and documentation of outcomes is necessary for ensuring that these programs meet the needs of the youth being served. The Team's review found a specific focus on government-funded programs, such as the Arches program. However, little research exists that represents the community-based standards and practices that have been developed at the grassroots level or that presents the perspectives of CMs themselves.

Recent interest in the field from government and private funders due to both increases in violence and the success of pillar programs have led to an increase in the interest and growth of CM programs. For these reasons, more research into the creation, implementation, and staffing of CM programs is necessary as funders seek to allocate resources to CM work and new organizations enter the space in order to maintain the quality of the field as it grows. In addition, a focus on the CMs themselves would provide an opportunity to better understand strategies for supporting these individuals in their healing from trauma they may have experienced due to systems-involvement. That CMs would benefit from leadership and skills development through their experiences is another aspect that can be further strengthened in the literature.

Methodology

The Team reviewed literature relevant to the recruitment of CMs. A dearth of research related to CM work and the multiple synonyms for the term "Credible Messenger" led the Team to rely on a three tiered approach to surfacing research:

- The terms "Credible Messenger" and "transformative mentor" were used interchangeably in some conversations with aligned organizations. In addition, in the mental health and substance abuse sectors, the term "wounded healer" is also used to

⁴⁰ Austria and Peterson, "Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth."

refer to CMs. In order to conduct a broad based search, these three terms were searched in the ProQuest, EBSCO, and SocIDENX databases using subject level filters.

- Keyword searches for “Credible Messenger,” “mentor,” “mentoring,” “wounded healer,” and “transformative mentor” were also conducted in youth or criminal justice research-focused and philanthropic databases.
- Keyword searches for pillar programs⁴¹ were conducted in ProQuest, EBSCO, SocINDEX, Google, and relevant organizational websites.
- A review of the websites and social media channels of case study organizations.

Identification

Evaluations of programs, best practices from Austria and Peterson, and research illustrate a broad consensus about the key qualities of CMs. First, CMs have lived experiences that help them connect with the experiences and challenges facing the youth they are serving.⁴² LeBel et al. describes the ways that the lived experiences of wounded healers, who serve a similar role as CMs, helped participants quickly relate to the mentors because they had shared experiences and understood nuanced issues like the code of the street, retaliation, and black masculinity that Doctors and medical staff did not. This pattern extends to CM programs like the Arches program where CMs served as a bridge between youth participants and external stakeholders that are perceived as authority figures.⁴³ These shared experiences helped mentors and mentees develop trusting and lasting relationships that can lead to positive outcomes for both parties. Clifton Fuller, a CM working with the Arches program, described this relationship very clearly. He says, “My work with the young people in Arches reminds me of when I was their age and the mistakes I used to make; I see so much of myself in the young people we work with.” Furthermore, the benefits extend beyond youth to the mentors themselves. Fuller also expressed that he could better empathize with youth.⁴⁴

Definitions of what constitutes shared lived experiences, however, varies across programs and sites. The Advocate, Intervene, Mentor⁴⁵ program (AIM) defined CMs as individuals who are respected in their communities, coming from the same neighborhood, and with a similar background as participants. The Evaluation of Arches found that the definition of a CM varied by

⁴¹ Pillar programs include Arches Transformative Mentoring, Roca, AIM, Community Connections for Youth, Youth Advocates Program, and the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (DYS).

⁴² LeBel, Richie, and Maruna, “Helping Others as a Response to Reconcile a Criminal Past”; Lynch et al., “Arches Transformative Mentoring Program An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City”; Cramer et al., “Evaluation Report on New York City’s Advocate, Intervene, Mentor Program”; Cespedes, “Evidence-Based Practices at a New York City Youth Justice Services Organization”; Austria and Peterson, “Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth”; Fuller and Goodman, “The Answer Is in the Community: Credible Messengers and Justice System Involved Youth.”

⁴³ Lynch et al., “Arches Transformative Mentoring Program An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City.”

⁴⁴ Fuller and Goodman, “The Answer Is in the Community: Credible Messengers and Justice System Involved Youth.”

⁴⁵ Advocate, Mentor Intervene (AIM) supports at-risk youth ages 13 - 18 under probation supervision to avoid out-of-home placement and recidivism in New York City. AIM provides youth with the option to return to their homes, rather than stay in detention or placement programs, with appropriate resources and support that help deter youth from adopting attitudes and behaviors that have led to criminal activity.

site.⁴⁶ Jannaetta in “A Research-Based Practice Guide to Reduce Youth Gun and Gang/Group Violence” finds that CMs do not necessarily need to have lived experiences, such as gang involvement, but need to be familiar with the culture of one’s community and believe that they can authentically support youth at high risk of gun violence.⁴⁷ This definition contrasts with the CURE Violence field where Violence Interrupters are usually former high-level or popular gang members who have changed their lives—often after a stint in prison.⁴⁸ The varying nature of the context and participants of these studies possibly leads to these multiple overlapping definitions of shared or lived experiences. Additional research could further refine how to best map the experiences of the mentors to successful experiences of participants being served.

Motivations

Matching the motivations of a potential mentor to the opportunity can improve the quality of the mentoring relationship and the experience of the mentors themselves. Garringer et al. cite six common motivations for volunteering: “developing and enhancing one’s career, enhancing and enriching one’s personal development, conforming to the norms of significant others, escaping from negative feelings, learning new skills and practicing underutilized abilities, and expressing values related to altruistic beliefs.”⁴⁹ These motivations match with research which finds that CMs who consider the benefits of mentoring to include personal learning, increased feelings of interpersonal competence, a sense of meaning and purpose, accomplishment and social approval. Mentors have a strong vested interest in the work they are doing and gain opportunities for employment and professional development.⁵⁰ The evaluation of Arches found that mentors were motivated because they grew up in the same neighborhood as mentees and were familiar with the challenges that they faced. Others experienced mentoring in prison or had shared experiences with youth even though they were not from the same neighborhood.⁵¹ Uncovering the motivations of potential CMs and matching recruiting methods to these varying motivations and the organization’s mission could lead to successful and durable mentoring relationships.

Key Skills

Beyond shared lived experiences, research on CMs shows that empathy, trust, honesty, and availability are other key characteristics of CM mentors. Underlying the importance of shared lived experiences is the ability for a CM to empathize with the experiences of their mentees. The Arches evaluation found that regardless of whether a CM was justice-involved, it was important for them to empathize with the experiences of their youth mentees and respond to

⁴⁶ Lynch et al., “Arches Transformative Mentoring Program An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City.”

⁴⁷ Jannetta et al., “A Research-Based Practice Guide to Reduce Youth Gun and Gang/Group Violence.”

⁴⁸ Butts et al., “CURE Violence: A Public Health Model to Reduce Gun Violence.”

⁴⁹ Garringer et al., “Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring Research-Informed and Practitioner-Approved Best Practices For Creating and Sustaining Impactful Mentoring Relationships and Strong Program Services.”

⁵⁰ LeBel, Richie, and Maruna, “Helping Others as a Response to Reconcile a Criminal Past”; Austria and Peterson, “Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth.”

⁵¹ Lynch et al., “Arches Transformative Mentoring Program An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City.”

their needs in a culturally sensitive way.⁵² In researching mentoring more broadly, Stukas et al. find that whether a person can take on another person's perspectives and feel empathy for their experience could be a predictor of a mentor's performance. However, they also find that there is little empirical evidence that investigates a mentor's dispositional traits and abilities and their ability to create durable relationships with youth.⁵³

Research on youth mentoring programs highlights the importance of a quality match between mentor and mentee. In order to maximize the overall impact of mentorship, matches should be personalized and long-term.⁵⁴ Successful mentoring relationships take time and commitment to develop. CM positions frequently require 24/7 responsiveness.⁵⁵ Availability, therefore, is another important trait in a CM. However, in these situations, there are risks of overworking CMs and failing to provide them with adequate self-care strategies and tools, support or counseling, and other resources necessary to ensure their well-being is prioritized over their programmatic contributions.

Other skills

Beyond the traits mentioned above, research has shown wide variation between the skills that mentors enter their position with and the skills CMs were trained for on-the-job within the implementation of the Arches and AIM programs. For example, some mentors in Arches had previous counseling experiences while others did not.⁵⁶ Similarly, program leaders of the AIM program differed in whether they believed that mentors with clinical experience or social work, as opposed to just lived experiences, were best suited to work with youth.⁵⁷ This tension is well articulated by Austria and Peterson who recommend that credible mentoring models include collaboration between clinical staff and mentors because each could bring value to the mentoring process. Moreover, many CMs may not have had access to uninterrupted education and structured professional development. Such observations reinforce the importance of organizations ensuring that their advertising and solicitation efforts are broad enough to welcome potential CMs willing to grow and develop skills necessary to succeed in their role regardless of educational background.⁵⁸

Both Arches and AIM programs provided on the job supplemental training on a wide range of subjects including group facilitation, mentoring, how to work with young people, motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral therapy, the ethics of mentoring, trauma-informed care,

⁵² Lynch et al.

⁵³ Stukas, Clary, and Snyder, "Mentor Recruitment and Retention."

⁵⁴ Garringer et al., "Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring Research-Informed and Practitioner-Approved Best Practices For Creating and Sustaining Impactful Mentoring Relationships and Strong Program Services"; Stukas, Clary, and Snyder, "Mentor Recruitment and Retention"; Cespedes, "Evidence-Based Practices at a New York City Youth Justice Services Organization."

⁵⁵ Lynch et al., "Arches Transformative Mentoring Program An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City."

⁵⁶ Lynch et al.

⁵⁷ Cramer et al., "Evaluation Report on New York City's Advocate, Intervene, Mentor Program."

⁵⁸ Austria and Peterson, "Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth."

addressing mental health concerns, and conflict-de escalation.⁵⁹ Although there is variation in the skills that mentors enter the field with, it seems that programs seek to provide a consistent set of training that are responsive to the needs of the program. Research done by the evaluators of the AIM program revealed that more effective mentors are equipped with training in theory-based practices related to youth and should have prior experiences with justice-involved youth.⁶⁰

Attraction

This section will present an overview of the literature pertaining to attracting CMs from an organizational perspective drawn from evaluations of the Arches and AIM programs as well as from the wider field of youth mentoring. A common sentiment held by both researchers and evaluators alike is that little research has been done on best practices on the recruitment process for mentors; however, the wider field of volunteer recruitment offers insights that can be applied to attracting CMs.⁶¹

Evaluations of the Arches and AIM programs and materials from Community Connections for Youth (CCFY), a pillar organization, revealed that attracting mentors through networks, peers, and youth are the most common and successful strategies. On their website, CCFY recommends that individuals seeking CMs contact community-based organizations that are led by formerly incarcerated individuals or agencies that hire CMs. The organization also suggests contacting faith-based organizations and highlights that the best way to find a CM is to ask young people, “Is there anyone from the neighborhood who used to be part of the problem and is now helping young people avoid the mistakes they once made?”⁶² The evaluation of Arches by the Urban Institute reflected a similar focus on attracting CMs that are based in the same communities and have similar lived experiences as the youth served through the program. The evaluation also highlighted that alumni who participated in the program could return as CMs and validate the program through their own progress.⁶³ Their research found that volunteerism increases when individuals are asked by people that they know; moreover, a non-peer reviewed study of mentor recruitment found that word-of-mouth recruitment might be the most effective recruitment strategy.⁶⁴ These findings are reinforced by a 2005 survey of 1,000 randomly selected Americans about what types of individuals choose to be mentors and why they choose to mentor. The survey found that 50% became mentors because they were asked.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Lynch et al., “Arches Transformative Mentoring Program An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City”; Cramer et al., “Evaluation Report on New York City’s Advocate, Intervene, Mentor Program.”

⁶⁰ Cespedes, “Evidence-Based Practices at a New York City Youth Justice Services Organization.”

⁶¹ Lynch et al., “Arches Transformative Mentoring Program An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City”; Stukas, Clary, and Snyder, “Mentor Recruitment and Retention.”

⁶² “Credible Messenger Mentoring FAQ’s.”

⁶³ Lynch et al., “Arches Transformative Mentoring Program An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City.”

⁶⁴ Lynch et al.

⁶⁵ Stukas, Clary, and Snyder, “Mentor Recruitment and Retention.”

Key literature on youth mentorship programs emphasizes the importance of tailoring recruiting messages to the individual characteristics of mentors needed and their potential motivations. Setting accurate expectations for the demands of the position to ensure that mentors are prepared to maintain their commitment to the mentoring program is also a best practice. Culturally sensitive mentors with similar backgrounds and experiences as youth have been shown to develop closer relationships.⁶⁶ As stated previously, the length of the mentoring relationship between mentor and mentee is one of the strongest predictors of positive outcomes to youth. Garringer et. al and Stukas, Clary, and Snyder's recommendations in part are derived from the need to create a functional relationship with the mentor at the outset so that mentors can fulfill their commitments to organizations and their mentees.⁶⁷

The content of the advertisements and other solicitation materials used for attracting mentors can strongly impact how well an organization recruits mentors and the durability of the relationship between mentor and organization. Garringer et al. highlights the importance of realistically describing the requirements, rewards, and challenges of mentoring while recruiting mentors. Written eligibility requirements and job descriptions are an effective way to communicate the expectations of any particular position. Setting accurate expectations upfront will allow mentors to decide whether a position is the right fit in terms of time commitment and skills needed. In addition, Garringer et al. suggest that organizations use messages that are intentionally crafted to engage appropriate target audiences whose skills and motivations best match the goals and structure of the mentoring program and the youth served.⁶⁸

Strategies for attracting messengers should also be tailored to address potential concerns about serving as a CM and to the varying dispositions individuals have with regard to mentoring. Garringer et. al identify a lack of time, a lack of interest, and health problems as common barriers to volunteering. In addition, potential mentors may have concerns about their ability to serve. This observation highlights that more time must be put into providing training for both CMs and CMs who are ready to be mentors in their respective roles. Messages and opportunities to attract mentors could be tailored to these concerns by communicating access to training, experts, and mentoring situations that are conducive to time and health constraints.⁶⁹ In addition, mentors may have differing dispositions toward volunteering which could also lead to taking different strategies toward recruitment. Stukas et al. identify three attitudes that an individual may have toward volunteering: individuals that are already primed to volunteer, individuals that are resistant to volunteering, and individuals that are open to volunteering depending on the offer. Individuals that are ready to volunteer can be reached through a simple educational campaign or through direct outreach from an organization or a

⁶⁶ Lynch et al., "Arches Transformative Mentoring Program An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City."

⁶⁷ Stukas, Clary, and Snyder, "Mentor Recruitment and Retention"; Garringer et al., "Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring Research-Informed and Practitioner-Approved Best Practices For Creating and Sustaining Impactful Mentoring Relationships and Strong Program Services."

⁶⁸ Garringer et al., "Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring Research-Informed and Practitioner-Approved Best Practices For Creating and Sustaining Impactful Mentoring Relationships and Strong Program Services."

⁶⁹ Garringer et al.

peer.⁷⁰ In terms of those who are open to an offer, Stukas et al. find that tailoring mentoring opportunities to potential motivations, such as professional development or altruistic goals, could bring in individuals who would otherwise not volunteer. Since there is variation in the types of individuals that may volunteer, researchers and evaluators recommend that organizations use multiple methods simultaneously to reach mentors, including direct asks by staff, peers, and mentors; presentations to community-based organizations (including re-entry and probation programs); and media campaigns.⁷¹

Organizational visibility within a community can also support successful attracting activities. In “Recruiting Mentors,” Public/Private Ventures recommended that organizations maintain broad name recognition in the community when targeting recruitment. They cite that the decision to volunteer is a two-part process: first, a person generally thinks about becoming a volunteer then, second, a trigger event transforms this general interest into concrete actions. As has been mentioned, this trigger event could be an ask by a peer or an organization or it could be through marketing materials about mentoring. Having broad local visibility for your organization is important so that when people are ready to volunteer they will recognize the organization’s mission and programs. Visibility can be accomplished through partnerships with local community-based organizations and community connections.⁷²

Interviewing & Selection

The interviewing and selecting phase of the recruitment process is an opportunity for organizations to ensure that CMs meet the criteria of the position, have the right motivations, and to ensure the safety of the youth being served.

Community validation is considered a key part of the process for selecting CMs. Potential CMs should be able to authentically engage in the communities that they are working in.⁷³ This two-way relationship allows mentors to successfully work with youth. However, little research exists that details how organizations can validate their mentors with communities. Austria and Peterson recommend that organizations seek recommendations from community leaders, clergy, neighborhood residents, law enforcement, and young people.⁷⁴ To an extent, the process by which a CM is attracted to a position—perhaps through recommendations by community organizations or neighborhood residents—would offer some community validation. However, community validation does not necessarily occur when a potential mentor self-validates their community experience or is contacted directly by the hiring organization. Further research could detail strategies for organizations to seek community validation for their mentors in order to build stronger programs.

⁷⁰ Stukas, Clary, and Snyder, “Mentor Recruitment and Retention.”

⁷¹ Lynch et al., “Arches Transformative Mentoring Program An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City”; Garringer et al., “Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring Research-Informed and Practitioner-Approved Best Practices For Creating and Sustaining Impactful Mentoring Relationships and Strong Program Services”; Stukas, Clary, and Snyder, “Mentor Recruitment and Retention.”

⁷² Jucovy, “Recruiting Mentors.”

⁷³ Austria and Peterson, “Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth.”

⁷⁴ Austria and Peterson.

Interviews are another key process for selecting CMs for work in a program. Evaluations of Arches and AIM did not detail the interview process for CMs. The evaluations include recommendations for vetting candidates because volunteer-based youth services like mentoring are considered high-risk contexts for the occurrence of abuse. The Arches evaluation suggested creating benchmarks for program practices to ensure that mentors are safe and suitable to be working with children. Such evaluations would include conducting a criminal history check, speaking with personal references, and using the interview to check for “red flags,” such as a negative attitude or lack of an interest in working with youth.⁷⁵ Janetta and Austria and Peterson suggest that involving law enforcement in the hiring process could also aid in the vetting process.

Janetta and Austria and Peterson also raise the issue that a previous criminal history could serve as an unfair barrier to employment for potential messengers. They cite a stigma that is associated with criminal convictions that is revealed in research on hiring practices for justice-involved individuals.⁷⁶ Austria and Peterson argue that although there may be risks of an individual returning to criminal behavior, that these risks are small compared to the possibility of hiring mentors that are not effective in working with youth. Furthermore, investing in mentors could provide valuable professional development to a population that has experienced interrupted education and a lack of access to on-the-job training. In addition, emphasizing community validation rather than previous background could help find CMs that are better suited for mentoring positions regardless of previous history.⁷⁷

Offering

Little research exists about the variations in employment terms for CM positions. A review of the implementation of the Arches and AIM programs showed that CMs are hired for full-time and part-time positions. A common refrain within this literature was that CMs were underpaid relative to number of hours worked with the expectation that some CMs are “on call” 24/7.⁷⁸ It is important to note that these programs are government-funded and may not be directly translatable to the structure of CM opportunities within the grassroots nonprofit sector.

Conclusion

A plethora of literature has found that Credible Messengering has illustrated the mentorship process as a bridge between communities, their youth, and systems-impacted adults seeking healing, guidance, and satisfaction in giving back. However, there remains a lack of research outlining or suggesting how CM programs should be implemented and specifically how CMs

⁷⁵ Lynch et al., “Arches Transformative Mentoring Program An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City.”

⁷⁶ Austria and Peterson, “Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth”; Jannetta et al., “A Research-Based Practice Guide to Reduce Youth Gun and Gang/Group Violence.”

⁷⁷ Austria and Peterson, “Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth.”

⁷⁸ Lynch et al., “Arches Transformative Mentoring Program An Implementation and Impact Evaluation in New York City”; Cramer et al., “Evaluation Report on New York City’s Advocate, Intervene, Mentor Program.”

should be recruited.⁷⁹ In addition, little research specifically uplifts the work done by CMs themselves. This research and report intends to address some of these important questions with the intention of understanding how the recruitment process can be strengthened at a critical juncture in the expansion of the CM movement in NYC.



⁷⁹ Austria and Peterson, “Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth.”

Findings & Analyses

The following section highlights key takeaways from the Team’s Literature Review, CM organization case studies (as can be found in Appendix 8), and stakeholder interviews for each of the four stages of recruitment. These takeaways were identified by the Team as the bedrock for informing promising practices likely to yield success in recruiting CMs, and, thus, can serve to fortify the workforce development foundation of the CM field and improve strategies for supporting CMs.

The paragraphs below take into consideration the initial lens of NB’s guiding principles in conjunction with the research discussed in the Literature Review to develop findings from across the CM ecosystem.

Interviewees referred and connected the Team to colleagues and others directly working in other CM organizations or in adjacent fields to help strengthen an understanding of the ecosystem. Through these interviews, the Team determined that most organizations involved in CM work share a number of similar values and that there is a certain degree of symmetry to the work, indicating connectedness within the ecosystem.

Despite having similar guiding principles, nuances between organizations remain; each organization has their own approach to CM recruitment. Most notably, there are two distinct recruitment approaches between government organizations and grassroots nonprofit organizations, as discussed in the “Ecosystem” section. Despite these differences in approaches, an overarching goal to prevent youth incarceration and violence characterizes the missions of most CM organizations.

While young people were at the center of many of the missions of case study organizations, one important takeaway from interviewees is that CM work extends beyond youth mentorship and addressing youth incarceration, although that is the area which is discussed most frequently. Interviewees explicitly expressed a collective interest in helping CMs address their own traumas and form a sense of community as part of the CM practice.

“Credible Messengers exist; they are a raw, natural resource in the community, in every oppressed, marginalized community that has been impacted by the justice system, impacted by poverty, impacted by racism, and how all those things come together as overall oppression. There are impacted people who have survived that experience, and are consciously interested in or are already contributing to a healing, restorative process.”

- Clinton Lacey, President & CEO, Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement

Identification

There is a general agreement among organizations on the desired traits in CMs, but some disagreement on the work experience candidates should possess.

One of the primary traits interviewees identified is that most CM are systems-involved, or somehow impacted, either directly or indirectly, by the justice system. Some have been involved in other systems, including the shelter system, the foster care system, the mental health system, addiction services, and more. As discussed by Reverend Winley of Living Redemption Youth Opportunity Hub, CMs typically tend to share similar lived experiences, even if they are not directly systems-impacted, but, ultimately, have gone through some type of transformative experience.⁸⁰ However, systems-involvement is not always a requirement, and there is more of an emphasis on whether CMs can relate to the issues facing their mentees, communicate, and empathize with them. This ability of empathize, which was discussed in the Arches evaluation in the Literature Review, was identified, by several interviewees, as an important trait among CMs.

There was also a consensus among interviewees and NB focus group members that the community has to identify someone as “credible.” T. Haywood stated that he lets the young people with whom he works decide whether he is a CM.⁸¹

In addition to lived experience, empathy, and credibility, organizations often look for whether CMs have: a connection to the neighborhood in which they will be working, a desire to give back to the community, and 24/7 availability to facilitate situations in real time.

Although the qualities and characteristics organizations look for when identifying CMs are similar across the board, there are some differences between grassroots organizations and government-run programs on what skill sets or work experiences CMs should have prior to joining their program. Many interviewees spoke to how many CM candidates were already doing this work prior to formally joining their organization. Grassroots organizations emphasized that CMs do not necessarily need to come in with formal mentorship training and skills, as the role will create opportunities for on the ground training. Government programs, such as the DC DYRS, look for CMs who already have some experience working with youth. During the interview process, they ask questions to determine whether candidates have mentored young people in the past, and whether they partook in any mentorship programs while incarcerated.⁸²

There is not enough formal data collection related to individuals involved in CM work.

A lack of data on individuals involved in CM work has been a common theme throughout various sections in this report. Regardless of organizational size, there is not enough demographic data collected about individual CMs (race, ethnicity, gender, age, languages

⁸⁰ Reverend Maurice Winley (Founder, Living Redemption Youth Opportunity Hub), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

⁸¹ T Haywood (Lead Mentor, Osborne Association), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

⁸² Norman Brown (Assistant Program Manager for Credible Messengers, DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

spoken, other factors) and overall a dearth in quantitative data on CMs, including turn-over and retention rates and compensation. This could be due to a lack of organizational resources and capacity or a digital divide among CMs, among other reasons.

Should an organization demonstrate interest in replicating program structures—without data on CM retention, demographics, wage scale, and other factors—new organizations may encounter challenges, including difficulty obtaining government and philanthropic funding and diminished interest of individuals in taking on CM roles. Collecting demographic data would allow for more thoughtful recruitment with the hope of creating long-term, trusting bonds between mentees and mentors. Data is integral to greater improvements in the field.

Attraction

Organizations typically do not face many challenges in recruiting CMs, but there is acknowledgement that retention can be maximized through thoughtful recruitment.

Most organizations interviewed were satisfied with their ability to attract CMs to the field. With the exception of government agencies, such as DC DYRS, CMs are typically recruited by word-of-mouth, which involves “tapping” people in personal networks, faith-based organizations, and other places in the neighborhood. CMs in the NB focus group explained that this process is successful because of its informality and organic nature. Similarly, Winley explained that there is no desire to advertise CM positions online because working with just one person spreads the message to many others. Senior CMs play a large role in attracting candidates. For example, Living Redemption Senior CM Beloved Hammond acts as an envoy by going out in communities and recruiting CMs.⁸³ As mentioned during an interview with Antonio Hendrickson, recruitment also occurs through community forums and events, as individuals tend to be drawn to the work if it is clearly communicated to them.⁸⁴

While these word-of-mouth strategies are predominantly used by grassroots organizations, larger nonprofits and government programs tend to publish formal job postings online, such as The Osborne Association’s posting found in Appendix 6. With the government application process being more rigorous, this can be a potential deterrent for applicants who are short on time and technological savvy—as is common among individuals returning from incarceration. As a result, some government programs tend to outsource contracts to grassroots organizations and, thereby, rely on their community-based recruitment practices

When thinking about thoughtful recruitment, one popular practice among groups is meeting potential candidates where they are in terms of skill sets and interests. For example, Hendrickson noted that many CMs at Lead By Example/Reverse the Trend come with different skills, and he encourages candidates to “get in where you fit in” while seeking to utilize the different skills of mentors in the organization’s programming.⁸⁵ CMs who are skilled in music, sports, the arts, and after school tutoring lead workshops that correspond with those abilities.

⁸³ Maurice Winley (Founder, Living Redemption Youth Opportunity Hub), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

⁸⁴ Antonio Hendrickson (Founder, Lead by Example/Reverse the Trend), in discussion with the authors, March 2022.

⁸⁵ Antonio Hendrickson (Founder, Lead by Example/Reverse the Trend), in discussion with the authors, March 2022.

Meeting candidates where they are creates a more welcoming and accepting environment where CMs can build upon their strengths and do not have to meet a list of required skills.

NB CMs echoed a similar sentiment of bringing in various backgrounds to fill their roles. Participants in the Team’s NB focus group had backgrounds in sleep study, sanitation, clothing design, retail, criminal justice advocacy, homeless prevention advocacy, government agencies, documentary making, music and record producing, and more. During the focus group, NB’s Evans sought to communicate the importance of highlighting the different interests, passions, and work of CMs that extend beyond mentoring and CURE Violence models. Regarding program impact, this practice could lead to more sustainable mentoring relationships if opportunities are well suited to the CMs selected.⁸⁶

As the industry continues to expand and organizations utilize thoughtful recruitment practices, questions remain on whether grassroots organizations could benefit from the standardization of these promising practices. This systematization of recruitment plans through formal job descriptions and expectations would have to be communicated in a way that is not exclusionary. There is a certain level of disagreement on standardization given its opposition to professionalization and potential to undermine organic, word-of-mouth recruitment processes.

Interviewing & Selection

There is variation between grassroots and government organizations regarding conducting formal background checks for potential CM candidates.

Both grassroots organizations and government programs conduct interviews prior to hiring. However, not all organizations conduct formal background checks as part of the selection process. Smaller, nonprofit organizations often cannot afford to do so.

Nearly all interviewees noted that there are criminal offenses which exclude an individual from participating in CM work. These offenses typically include sexual crimes against children and domestic violence. Otherwise, as noted by Five Mualimm-ak at Incarcerated Nation Network, there are typically not many limitations for who cannot be hired as a CM.⁸⁷ This practice supports the overall theme of the CM field being welcoming and inclusive of people impacted by the justice system and using restorative practices centered on healing so that systems-impacted people are not excluded in the way they are from many career opportunities.

Outside of formal background checks, candidate vetting can look different depending on the organization; but, Clinton Lacey stated that in DC—and now in a growing number of places—there is a “community background check,” during which the CM organization relies on community feedback and references on the candidate to ensure that their actions and movement in the community are consistent with the values, principles, and aims of CM work. In some government agencies, vetting is often done by a consultant—often a community

⁸⁶ Garringer et al., “Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring Research-Informed and Practitioner-Approved Best Practices For Creating and Sustaining Impactful Mentoring Relationships and Strong Program Services.”

⁸⁷ Five Mualimm-ak (Founder, Incarcerated Nation Network), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

leader—who checks if the candidate has current gang affiliations. Lacey noted that vetting is important for credibility and ensuring the protection of the integrity of the job. Though it is important to note that there is some disagreement between organizations as to whether gang affiliation disqualifies an individual from being a CM. Some organizations prefer to focus more on whether a person has transformed themselves and is no longer bringing harm to their communities regardless of gang association.

Organizations with less funding that may not be able to conduct formal background checks may rely on other candidate screening methods, like referrals from the community (echoing the idea that people in the community have already identified them as credible) or a shadowing period. During the shadowing period, which will be discussed further in the Offering subsection, prospective CMs work with senior CMs to determine if they are a “good fit,” or align the values of the organization, are able to perform the required tasks, and have desires to learn and improve themselves.

Research and interviewees have raised the concern that previous criminal history could also serve as an unfair barrier to employment for potential messengers. They cite a stigma that is associated with criminal convictions that is revealed in research on hiring practices for justice-involved individuals.⁸⁸ Background checks could decrease the quality of potential CMs by narrowing the pool of candidates.⁸⁹

Offering

Shadowing or a trial period are most valuable ways to ascertain “fit” within an organization, as well as solidify a role’s expectations.

Shadowing can be seen as a bridge between the selection and offering processes. Though variable across organizations, shadowing periods play an important role in hiring processes across the ecosystem. Prior to starting the job, DC DYRS requires a five day bootcamp, which is meant to help CMs hold themselves accountable by learning the expectations of the role and identifying their strengths and weaknesses.⁹⁰ Over the course of these five days, CMs learn more about the communities they will work in, the history of CM work, vicarious trauma and triggering experiences, and how to keep themselves healthy while doing CM work. The DC program also has a trial period during which a novice CM, whether skilled or unskilled, is paired with an experienced CM. For the first month, novice CMs shadow their mentor to get a feel for the work.

Some organizations contracted with the Arches program have a formal probation period which can last anywhere from three to six months. During this time, CMs are evaluated and observed to determine where they might fit in the organization, how well they work with the program

⁸⁸ Austria and Peterson, “Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth”; Jannetta et al., “A Research-Based Practice Guide to Reduce Youth Gun and Gang/Group Violence.”

⁸⁹ Austria and Peterson, “Credible Messenger Mentoring For Justice-Involved Youth.”

⁹⁰ Norman Brown (Assistant Program Manager for Credible Messengers, DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

team, and whether they have basic work competencies (e.g., punctuality, communication skills, etc.).⁹¹

Shadowing and trial periods are promising methods for fostering experiential learning for CMs, and are consistent with the aim of encouraging full investment in CM candidates.

Although many smaller organizations currently do not have the funding to increase compensation for CMs, there is a desire to and movement toward pay(ing) CMs higher wages and promoting them to leadership positions.

Organizations manage the compensation issue differently, evident in their employment terms. Based on an organization’s capacity, CM roles can be volunteer-based and unpaid, part-time, full-time, or consultant positions. There is widespread recognition that the nature of being a CM requires being available 24/7 to perform a wide variety of tasks, ranging from assisting at community based events to directly providing one-on-one mentoring to young people. Interviewees pointed out that since CMs are working far beyond the typical 9–5 work day, it is especially important that they are fairly compensated and adequately supported. Some interviewees expressed concerns that most CMs are not paid sufficiently according to the amount of work performed, and maintained that there must be a movement towards providing more financial support. As a result, many CMs have to juggle multiple part-time jobs in addition to their CM roles. Although smaller organizations lack the funding to pay CMs for full-time, and even part-time positions, there is a desire to make sure that CMs are paid for their labor.

There is also movement toward uplifting CMs by promoting them to leadership positions within their respective organizations. Additionally, many organizations already value CMs’ insights into the vetting, training, and recruitment processes, encouraging them to play a bigger role in decision making and impacting organizational culture. Winley pointed out that there is “no ceiling” for this work—CMs can be trained to become directors.⁹² Opportunities for growth can be intentionally built into the role to inspire, motivate, and affirm CMs that they can achieve professional success regardless of their backgrounds.

“I love coming to work. There’s no price you can put on that. I love coming here. I love being with the team. I love being with the participants.”

- T Haywood, Lead Mentor, Osborne Association

⁹¹ Reverend Maurice Winley (Founder, Living Redemption Youth Opportunity Hub), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

⁹² Reverend Maurice Winley (Founder, Living Redemption Youth Opportunity Hub), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

CMs do not prioritize monetary compensation as a requirement for continuing to do this work. There is a culture of humility among CMs, which can contribute to avoiding discussion about monetary compensation.

All of the CMs who discussed their experiences emphasized that they do not view CM work as a job in the traditional sense, but rather, as a way of life. Some stressed that CMs should not have a transactional relationship with the affiliated organization. Many explained that they were doing this work prior to ever joining an organization, and that this is a way of giving back to the community and ensuring that young people do not make the same mistakes.⁹³ One person stated that this work is a form of trauma-informed activism and personal growth. There was a deep sense of humility among CMs in the NB focus group, as each participant was humble about their skills, previous work experience, and activism. It is clear based upon the stories of each CM interviewed that they take a modest approach to discussing higher wages for their work, and tend to view this work as an integral part of their personal lives. Regardless of this culture of humility, there is still agreement among CM organizations and stakeholders that CMs must be paid a living wage in order to sustain themselves financially.

“How do you support that worker [CM], in social wellness, in mental wellness, in physical wellness, in economic wellness? You have these dimensions. What are you doing to make sure that these workers thrive and stay with the organization for as long as possible so that they don’t burn out? “

- Tamara Oyola-Santiago, Co-Director, Institute for Transformative Mentoring

There are a number of formal and informal benefits that come with being a CM, including training opportunities, developing a sense of community, building a professional network, and receiving tools to foster healing.

Although the CM field is not necessarily interested in credentialing, there is an emphasis on learning on-the-job and providing continuous training opportunities, which are often provided externally by third party organizations. In addition, programs vary by the skills sought in potential mentors and the training provided to CMs once onboard.⁹⁴

One of the most popular training courses in New York City is the Institute for Transformative Mentoring (ITM) at the New School. ITM uses restorative justice practices and interactive learning to teach topics such as trauma-informed care, youth development, and the history of mass incarceration. Students who participate in the course also attend workshops, film screenings, and policy events that are designed to help build a professional network and a base for ongoing criminal justice reform. Other stakeholders, such as the Credible Messenger Justice Center (CMJC), provide personal and professional assistance by supporting CMs in mental health and legal issues, in addition to substance abuse prevention and financial literacy. CMJC

⁹³ Focus group of Credible Messengers associated with Neighborhood Benches in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

⁹⁴ Lynch et al., “Arches Transformative Mentoring Program.”

also provides training workshops which range from basic sessions on first aid and CPR to more advanced ones on motivational interviewing, family engagement, and youth intervention.

Outside of formalized training, there is agreement within the CM community that much of the learning and growth that CMs experience occurs on the ground while fulfilling their daily responsibilities. During the focus group, CMs shared that they gained a number of skills throughout their time with NB, including becoming more confident in their public speaking, engaging and empathizing with different people, becoming more comfortable working with young people, acquiring a robust vocabulary related to CM work, and navigating hostile situations.⁹⁵ Other than the on-the-ground learning, the Hammond brothers also emphasized the internal peace that comes with giving back to the community and witnessing the beautification of the community, as well as the opportunities to be intentional about self-care and personal growth.⁹⁶

Other Findings

With the increased mainstream recognition of CM work, new organizations may disrupt the field by oversaturating it, stretching resources, and skewing collective interpretations of who CMs are.

Currently, there is a consensus that CMs are individuals with lived experience. The extent to which this experience is relevant to a certain organization and what type of experience this is depends on the organization's needs and other contextual factors. However, some within the field believe that the term "Credible Messenger" has become too broad, and that the CM title should be strictly limited to directly systems-impacted individuals who have returned to give back to the community they grew up in or are recognized in. Regardless of sentiments on the exact definition of the term, there is a general concern about the inconsistent use of "Credible Messenger". Different organizations stress different parts of the CM definition, with some understanding it as anyone with lived experience and a tie to the community, while others emphasize that it is more important that CMs have a desire to connect with youth and empathize. Overall, interviewees noted that it is important to maintain the integrity of the field and ensure that new stakeholders and participants in the field are aware of the meaning and history behind the CM term. Additionally, as the field continues to grow, there are some concerns about oversaturation and stretching resources, as grassroots organizations historically have received smaller shares of funding.

⁹⁵ Focus group of Credible Messengers associated with Neighborhood Benches in discussion with the authors, April 2022

⁹⁶ Beloved and Dorin Hammond (CMs, Living Redemption Youth Opportunity Hub), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.



Recommendations

As a result of deep engagement with NB and the greater ecosystem of nonprofit and government entities—as well as review of topical literature—the Team suggests the following strategic recommendations for CM recruitment processes. These recommendations represent a collection of promising practices that aim to: (1) contribute to fortifying the integrity and impact of new and existing organizations at this critical juncture for the field, and (2) support CMs on their journeys from systems-involvement to healing.

Identification

Strengthen internal processes for demographic data collection.

The collection of demographic data on applicants and onboarded CMs will strengthen the recruitment process in two ways. The first is to have a more thorough understanding of the profile of the CM, which can be tracked over time periods to better understand who is and isn't being recruited to the work. The second is to identify demographic gaps in comparison to the youth mentees and potential mentees. The youth that stand to benefit from CM-related interventions are a diverse population, including people of different ethnicities, genders, etc. The nature of CM work is that CMs must be relatable to those they mentor, thus it is vital that

the CM workforce represent the diversity of the communities served. This goal of matching mentors to mentees is an existing best practice for both government and grassroots organizations, but is most often an informal process based on specific needs that arise, rather than the intentional maintenance of a diverse CM pool. As suggested by Hendrickson, diversity can also serve the inclusivity of the image and mission of CM work by preventing it from being “a black or white thing.”⁹⁷

To ease the process of data collection, organizations should consider integrating demographic data collection into the recruitment process by including questions on applications or onboarding forms. During the research process, the Team crafted a CM survey that collects data on race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, family status, gender identity and sexual orientation, disability status, educational attainment, incarceration record and language indicators. The survey is available in Appendix 5 and can be leveraged as an application or intake component.

Increase consistent monitoring of outcomes and impact metrics related to CMs.

Metrics should include indicators related to turnover, recidivism, pay, formal benefits, career advancement, well-being, and drug or alcohol relapse and include quantitative indicators such as length of engagement, as well as qualitative indicators such as changes in a CMs sense of meaning and purpose.⁹⁸ The proactive monitoring of outcomes and impact on CMs is useful for the evaluation of short and long-term program goals and improves an organization’s ability to improve organizational practices through adaptive response. Impact data can also be used to benchmark against program outcomes for mentees, ease replication of best practices across the field, and contribute to increased funding and policy support. Additionally, to have a better understanding of retention levels and reasons for CM turnover, data collection on the length and nature of engagement (i.e., full-time, part-time, volunteer) and CM exit surveys should be conducted upon a CM’s departure. Data collected can elucidate motivations for disengagement (e.g., unsatisfactory compensation, burnout, career growth) and assist organizations in developing strategies to address reported findings. Digital skills training for CMs should be coupled with efforts to improve metrics to improve response rates and data collection.

Strive for field-wide consensus on the essential characteristics of a CM.

Because there are varying requirements in terms of the desired skills and experience of CMs across organizations, developing a field-wide consensus on a CM’s essential characteristics will aid in creating clarity of the role to better lead funding and government organizations in CM related work as they enter the field. Consensus will also contribute to differentiation between CM work and similar roles, such as Violence Interrupters—a need identified by Mualimm-ak⁹⁹ and other interviewees. Just as the community validates the credibility of an individual CM, the broader CM community, rather than funders or policy makers, should undertake achieving a

⁹⁷ Antonio Hendrickson (Founder, Lead by Example/Reverse the Trend), in discussion with the authors, March 2022.

⁹⁸ Lynch et al., “Arches Transformative Mentoring Program”; Stukas, Clary, and Snyder, “Mentor Recruitment and Retention.”

⁹⁹ Five Mualimm-ak (Founder, Incarcerated Nation Network), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

verifiable consensus on the core identifiers of a powerful and effective CM. Government entities must have clarity on the meaning of the term Credible Messenger or they risk perpetuating confusion. As advised by Lacey, “Credible Messengers do many types of community work—from violence interruption to longer term transformative mentoring—and government solicitations need to do a better job of understanding and defining the types of services, approaches, and models that are being solicited. It is up to the field to shed some light on that.”¹⁰⁰

Attraction

Prioritize clear expectation-setting; targeted job postings; and multiple, diverse channels for attracting CMs.

Communication of the roles, responsibilities, target populations, compensation, formal and informal benefits, as well as the required traits and experience prior to hiring CMs, will contribute to decreased turnover rates and the consistency and availability of onboarded CMs.¹⁰¹ For larger organizations and government agencies, this means accurately representing the requirements in job descriptions, while being cognizant of alienating language. Purposefully eliminating requirements that are a barrier to the most desirable candidates is a best practice suggested by Lily Shapiro, Policy Counsel at The David Rothenberg Center for Public Policy at The Fortune Society based on her time as the Senior Policy Advisor to the Commissioner at the NYC Department of Probation.¹⁰² This may also include references to on-the-job training to avoid unintentional alienation of candidates who possess key desired characteristics, but are deterred because they lack mentoring-related training or experience.

For smaller organizations who primarily recruit through word-of-mouth and may have a less defined scope of work, there should be a standard practice for verbally communicating and confirming with the applicant the requirements, responsibilities, and benefits of the position. Understanding the motivations of potential CMs, such as altruistic goals or a desire for personal growth, and including these motivations as desired characteristics on job postings,¹⁰³ is an additional recommended practice for attracting candidates. The use of multiple advertising channels and formal and informal community partnerships¹⁰⁴ will also aid the recruitment process by expanding an organization’s visibility and maximizing inquiries into CM positions. Advertising channels may include word-of-mouth, job boards, social media, community outreach, college re-entry programs, re-entry organizations, and mentee-to-mentor pipelines, and should be chosen based on the target community and prior results.

¹⁰⁰Clinton Lacey (President & CEO, Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement), in discussion with the authors, March 2022.

¹⁰¹ Garringer et al., “Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring Research-Informed and Practitioner-Approved Best Practices For Creating and Sustaining Impactful Mentoring Relationships and Strong Program Services.”

¹⁰² Lily Shapiro (Policy Counselor, Fortune Society), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

¹⁰³ Stukas, Clary, and Snyder, “Mentor Recruitment and Retention.”

¹⁰⁴ Stukas, Clary, and Snyder.

Interviewing & Selection

Conduct background checks and community vetting, tailored to the needs and capacity of the organization.

As highlighted throughout this report, the success of the field depends on the credibility of the CMs. Vetting and background checks help to ensure this credibility with mentees, communities, funders, and ultimately policymakers, as well as protect the safety of mentees. Organizations and agencies that have the capacity to do so should conduct formal background checks to screen for exclusionary offenses. Vetting by a consultant with strong ties to the community, as performed by the DC DYRS,¹⁰⁵ is highly encouraged for larger organizations that have more formal recruiting processes and may not have direct community ties with applicants. This community vetting process serves to confirm an applicant's background, affiliations and reputation in the community. For grassroots organizations where community vetting is generally more integrated into the recruiting process, additional community vetting may not be necessary.

Offering

Include shadowing and trial periods in the onboarding process.

Trial periods reduce turnover rates by confirming fit between the CM and the organization, as well as providing CMs the opportunity to affirm that the work suits their needs and expectations. This will contribute to decreased turnover, and stability for mentees when CMs are prepared to meet the demands of the position. For smaller, grassroots organizations that offer more flexible and community-tailored programming, trial periods provide the opportunity to better understand the specific skill set and interests of a CM and utilize that knowledge to tailor programming and a growth plan to the CM. As practiced by Lead by Example/Reverse the Trend and other grassroots organizations, discovering and embracing a CM's interests in areas such as clothing design or mural painting enhances the experience for CMs and contributes to effective, community-tailored programming. This will ultimately contribute to increased retention and better outcomes for both CMs and mentees.

Increase monetary compensation, formal benefits, and career growth opportunities.

Despite the level of commitment required of CMs, pay and benefits often fail to be commensurate with the demands of the position. The capacity to do so varies across organization types, but it should be a goal of the field to explore strategies and funding models that ensure CMs at all organizations are paid a living wage and have access to formal benefits, like health care. While prioritizing compensation, it is important to emphasize the earlier stages of the recruitment process, namely community vetting, which serves to confirm CMs' altruistic motivation. This will protect against the role becoming solely a financial opportunity as compensations and benefits increase. Additionally, CMs must be hired into decision-making positions beyond direct mentoring work to create structural change guided by those with lived

¹⁰⁵ Norman Brown (Assistant Program Manager for Credible Messengers, DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

experience. As Winley shared in his interview, if CMs are valued in this way, then they have the power to be the “vaccine to recidivism.”¹⁰⁶ Smaller organizations should continue challenging CMs to design and lead programming. This empowerment is a catalytic growth and leadership opportunity for CMs, strengthening their catalog of transferable skills and, thereby, increasing their qualifications for future, professional opportunities.

Fortify the culture of healing and growth-oriented skill-building.

An admirable facet of the CM movement is valuing CMs as individuals who have their own challenges and experiences with trauma. The emphasis on personal growth and self-care both benefits CMs and serves to model positive behavioral change to mentees. This specific type of skill-building through on-the-job learning and formal training must continue to be prioritized; it enhances program effectiveness and is an inherently valuable act of investment in CM well-being and career growth. Grassroots organizations, who tend to offer CM work as a growth opportunity rather than a paid position, should consider how to aid CMs in gaining widely applicable skills (e.g., digital skills and literacy), and in highlighting their gained, transferable skills and enhanced sense of self-empowerment when seeking employment in other sectors. This could be achieved through workshops or professional mentoring to learn how to best demonstrate developed abilities on applications and in interviews to successfully secure employment. The field should also consider avenues to increasing accessibility of training programs, such as affordable community college programs or associated Associate or Bachelor degrees, transferable college credits, prison education programs, and compensation to part-time CMs for attending required training courses.

Additional Recommendations

Strengthen communication, networks, and knowledge sharing across the field.

While relationships between key actors and organizations were found to be positive and cooperative, as Evans noted, few are communicating their recruitment processes.¹⁰⁷ Enhancing communication and building networks will help in sharing best practices, encourage consensus between diverse parties within the CM ecosystem, help maintain funding streams to grassroots organizations, and contribute to a more cohesive and inclusive voice for the field.

Ensure balanced funding and program ownership between government entities and grassroots organizations.

As the field gains momentum and government funding increases, it is important to maintain the diversity of the organizations receiving funding and leading the work. Grassroots organizations, where the movement originated, should be purposefully included if the integrity of the field, as well as a pipeline of CMs, is to continue. A best practice recommended by Lacey that should be further explored by government agencies and large nonprofit organizations is purposeful outreach to grassroots organizations prior to the release of a program Concept Note and

¹⁰⁶ Reverend Maurice Winley (Founder, Living Redemption Youth Opportunity Hub), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

¹⁰⁷ William M. Evans (Founder & President, Neighborhood Benches), in discussion with the authors, February 2022.

Request for Proposal process to ensure the engagement of a host of providers that may have capacity limits in terms of 501(3)(c) status, grant writing, and administrative capacity, but offer valuable community connections and knowledge.¹⁰⁸ As suggested by Felipe A. Franco of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, based on experience with the recruitment of Youth Development Specialists at the NYC Administration for Children’s Services Division of Youth and Family Justice, utilizing community-based providers will also aid in the attraction of candidates who may be deterred by the community’s perception of their working directly for a government entity, but receive community validation for working with a local nonprofit organization.¹⁰⁹



Conclusion and Further Considerations

This is an exciting period for the Credible Messenger movement; the grassroots, community-based solution is gathering momentum with policy makers and government officials. The opportunity is here to leverage the impact potential of Credible Messengers for community healing and the halting of cycles of youth incarceration and violence. To take full advantage of this opportunity, the field must maintain and enhance the quality of CM programming, which relies on authentic and sustained relationships between CMs and mentees. This report is a contribution to the knowledge base for understanding how CMs may be recruited to achieve these quality relationships and therefore maintain integrity of the movement.

¹⁰⁸ Clinton Lacey (President & CEO, Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement), in discussion with the authors, March 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Felipe A. Franco (Senior Fellow, The Annie E. Casey Foundation), in discussion with the authors, March 2022.

The Team is thankful to the CMs, especially the initiator of this project, William M. Evans, who shared not only what they do, but who they are. As a result, the Team gained a deep understanding of CMs through the interviews conducted and strived to reflect those voices. If more time had been available, increased participatory research would have further enhanced this understanding, and is recommended for future research. Additionally, had the Team had additional time it would have further pursued data collection on demographics, compensation and formal benefits, as well as included a broader geographic reach for the organizations and individuals interviewed. Because the scope of this report was limited to the recruitment process, further research is recommended on the training and career development of CMs, which includes the following final considerations.

Consider CM work as a springboard to professional opportunity. While CM work can be considered a life-long commitment, for the short term, CM work can be a springboard for professional growth and additional career opportunities. This may include CMs progressing in related fields, launching their own projects, or seeking professional growth in other fields. Positive impacts of framing CM work as a career growth opportunity may include attracting candidates to the work when financial compensation is not available and giving CMs an opportunity to increase their professional and economic opportunity, which may result in a positive ripple effect on the community. Negative impacts may include a loss of credibility for the field if people are drawn to the work for personal gain rather than a desire to give back to the community. Further investigation should look to see if a balance is possible, and if so, how a replicable roadmap for career growth can be created.

Investigate the risks and benefits of credentialing CM work. Other forms of mentoring such as Violence Interruption and Mental Health Family and Youth Peer Advocates employed by New York State are required to earn specific accreditations.¹¹⁰ Interviewees provided varied responses to the idea of credentialing CM work, from the fear of professionalization of the sector to an acknowledgement that it may aid CMs in furthering their careers and goals. Existing, credentialed mentoring programs mentioned earlier in this report, as well as CM formal training courses such as the ITM, should be studied to glean best practices that could be applied to the CM field.

Explore avenues for public recognition of CMs. There is a conversation within the CM movement surrounding highlighting CMs and publicly acknowledging their commitment, but there is yet to be concrete ways of doing so. Stakeholders and CMs may look to other fields for ideas, as well as best practices within the CM field, including certificates or awards, as suggested by NYC Council Member Kristin Richardson Jordan,¹¹¹ acknowledgement from public officials, and journalism projects like the Credible Messenger Reporting Project, which pairs journalists with CMs to publicize the CMs' stories.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Families Together in New York State, "Families Together in NYS | Families Together in NYS."

¹¹¹ Kristin Richardson Jordan (NYC District 9 Councilmember), in discussion with the authors, April 2022

¹¹² "Credible Messenger Reporting Project."

Final Thoughts

T Haywood, a CM who has been mentoring for over 40 years and is currently Program Coordinator for Youth Services and the Bronx Osborne Gun Diversion Accountability Program at the Osborne Association,¹¹³ shared with the Team his thoughts on what qualifies someone as a Credible Messenger. Using the analogy of a well, he explained that a CM is not just someone who transforms themselves to leave the dark and dirty water of the well, but is anyone who goes down into the well to meet others where they are and help guide them out. When that happens beauty can bloom just like a lotus flower, which is born out of the dirtiest water. The Team encourages the readers of this report to reach into the well to cultivate the growth of new lotus flowers.

¹¹³ T Haywood (Lead Mentor, Osborne Association), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

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Quotation Citations

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Antonio Hendrickson (Founder, Lead by Example/Reverse the Trend), in discussion with the authors, March 2022.
William M. Evans (Founder & President, Neighborhood Benches), in discussion with the authors, February 2022.
Daniel Barber (President, Andrew Jackson Houses Resident Association), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.
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Tamara Oyola-Santiago (Co-Director, Institute for Transformative Mentoring), in discussion with the authors, April 2022.

Photographs

All photographs contained in this report were sourced from the Neighborhood Benches Instagram account with express permission of account owner William M. Evans.

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Appendix 1: Definition of Terms

For ease of reference, the Team defines a collection of the report’s frequently used terms below.

At-risk: An individual who is exposed to or highly susceptible to a particular condition or outcome (e.g., criminal behavior, incarceration, drug use).

Credible Messenger (CM): Individuals with lived experiences—frequently in the criminal justice system—who have transformed their lives and become agents of change in their communities¹¹⁴

Alternate terms: “Credible Messenger Mentor,” “Transformative Mentor,” “Neighborhood Leader.”

Lived experience: Personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people.¹¹⁵

Mentorship: influence, guidance, or direction given by a mentor¹¹⁶

Mentor: An individual who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person; an individual who influences the personal and professional growth of a mentee.¹¹⁷

Mentee: An individual who receives mentorship.¹¹⁸

Systems-impacted: An individual who is legally, economically, or familially affected in a negative way by the criminal justice system.¹¹⁹

Systems-involved: An individual who is involved in the criminal justice system.

Wounded Healer: An individual who, not in all cases, is an ex-offender or a recovering addict, helps formerly incarcerated or recovering individuals.

Youth: Persons between the ages of 15 and 24.¹²⁰

¹¹⁴ Martinez et al., “New York City’s Wounded Healers.”

¹¹⁵ “Engaging People with Lived Experience: A Toolkit for Organizations | Suicide Prevention Resource Center.”

¹¹⁶ “Mentorship.”

¹¹⁷ “Mentorship.”

¹¹⁸ “Mentorship.”

¹¹⁹ “About — Berkeley Underground Scholars.”

¹²⁰ United Nations, “Youth.”

Appendix 2: Stakeholder Groups

Credible Messenger organizations

- Recruit and offer CM positions to systems-impacted community leaders
- Typically nonprofits, but can also be in the government space

Training and certification programs

- Independent nonprofit organizations or nonprofits affiliated with academic institutions
- Provide training to CMs on: technology, youth mentoring, trauma-informed healing, writing, community navigating, and cognitive-behavioral therapy
- Some provide career development services and college credits

Re-entry organizations

- Support individuals returning from incarceration to re-assimilate and productively re-engage in their communities
- Interested in reducing recidivism

New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)

- Public development corporation which provides public housing
- Works with organizations and NYC departments to run programming for its residents' in order to dissuade violence
- NYCHA tenant organization presidents may work with organizations, like NB, to identify potential CMs

New York City Department of Probation (DOP)

- Works within the criminal and juvenile justice systems to ensure people on probation are held accountable and are provided opportunities to stay out of the justice system
- Created CM-related programs and organizations, like Arches and the Credible Messengering Justice Center, in order to address a lack of mentorship for individuals who are justice-involved
- Invested in expanding the influences of CM related organizations in order to make NYC safer for all its residents

Philanthropic organizations

- Nongovernmental, nonprofit organizations which provide social services either through funding and/or donated assets to CM organizations
- Broad investment goals, such as supporting community development and engagement

Elected officials ¹²¹

- Local elected officials also bridge the gap between city residents and their concerns by bringing them to the legislative level
- In the CM space, Council members can help connect re-entering community members to city resources and also recommend community members to CM organizations

¹²¹ While elected officials range from Mayors to City Council members, the Team only interviewed City Council members

Appendix 3: List of Interviewees

Organization	Interview Date	Name	Title
Credible Messenger Organizations			
At Risk Movement	April 21, 2022	Gregory Brooks	Founder
Living Redemption Youth Opportunity Hub	April 4, 2022	Rev. Maurice Winley	Founder & Arches Project Director
		Dedric (Beloved) Hammond	Credible Messenger
		Dorin Hammond	Credible Messenger
Credible Messenger Reporting Project	March 11, 2022	Jim MacMillan	Executive Director
Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement	April 18, 2022	Clinton Lacey	President & CEO
Lead by Example/Reverse the Trend	March 2, 2022	Antonio Hendrickson	Founder
Neighborhood Benches	Various	William M. Evans	Founder & President
Neighborhood Benches	April 13, 2022	Wallic Venson	Credible Messenger
		Cadeem Gibbs	Credible Messenger
		Kinisha Barrett	Credible Messenger
		Daniel Osario	Credible Messenger
		Bryant Revells	Credible Messenger
		Terry Brown	Credible Messenger

		Shams DaBaron (Da Homeless Hero)	Credible Messenger
Training/Certificate Programs			
The Navigator Certificate at the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity	April 18, 2022	Yanneska Quezada	Career Pathways Coordinator
Incarcerated Nation Network	April 5, 2022	Five Mualimm-ak	Founder
Institute for Transformative Mentoring	April 2, 2022	Tamara Oyola-Santiago	Co-Director
Re-Entry			
Columbia University	March 25, 2022	Flores Forbes	Associate Vice President, Community Affairs
Fortune Society	April 3, 2022	Lily Shapiro	Policy Counselor
Osborne Association	April 14, 2022	T Haywood	Program Coordinator, Youth Services (including the Bronx Osborne Gun Diversion Accountability Program)
DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services	April 3, 2022	Turnesha Fish, Ph.D	Public Information Officer
		Norman Brown	Assistant Program Manager for Credible Messengers
New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)			

Andrew Jackson Houses Resident Association	April 7, 2022	Daniel Barber	President
Philanthropy			
The Annie E. Casey Foundation	March 31, 2022	Felipe A. Franco	Senior Fellow
Elected Officials			
NYC District 9	April 8, 2022	Kristin Richardson Jordan	Councilmember
NYC District 16	April 15, 2022	Althea Stevens	Councilmember

Appendix 4: Interview Questions

Neighborhood Benches Deep Dive with Founder

Session 1: Organization Background and Programming

1. What is your mission statement?
2. What does the community think your mission is?
3. What are your guiding principles?
4. What are your main programs?
5. Short-term outcomes? Quantify.
6. What's the effect? Benefits.
7. Long-term outcomes? Quantify.
8. What were your expectations of success? Now? Do you measure this?
9. What does success look like in the future?

Session 2: Recruitment

1. What would you write in the job description of a CM?
2. Is being/should being systems-impacted be a requirement?
3. How are potential CMs recommended to you/NB?
4. Are there things specific to NYC that we should consider when thinking about identifying/recruiting CM?
5. Vetting process: How do you know if a CM is in it for the right reasons?
6. What are the right reasons?
7. Are there restrictions?
8. Does vetting involve a psychological evaluation? Formal or not?
9. Are there populations that you "target" for CM identification?
10. For which of those demographic groups would you like to see growth?
11. Where in the community do you go to seek out CMs?
12. What are the strategies for approaching a CM?
13. What are the incentives to get CM onboard (e.g., material, otherwise)?
14. What are the main partners you work with for recruiting CMs?
15. Do people want to be CM? Is this an exciting prospect?
16. What is the motivation for individuals who seek out CM work?
17. How do you approach trauma in individuals?

Session 3: Training, Retention, Career Ladders

1. Is training internal or external? Which organization(s)?
2. What does that training look like?
3. Is training mandatory?
 - a. Where?
 - b. How long?
 - c. Compensation? (Opportunity cost of their time)
 - d. Existing curriculum? Shared or individualistic?
 - e. Evaluation of training?
 - f. Credentialing?

- g. What skill sets does training equip CMs with?
- h. Continuous? Need to re-up throughout time as CM?
- 4. What are the employment terms?
- 5. How do CMs tend to respond to training? Feedback from CMs on training.
- 6. What training and skills are most important for CMs?
- 7. Differences in training based on gender, race, etc.?
- 8. What is Neighborhood Benches' retention/turnover rate?
- 9. What are the reasons people cite for leaving the position?
- 10. Do you do anything to encourage community between CMs?
- 11. Offer any benefits (e.g., skill-building, therapy, community, etc.) to retain CMs?
- 12. What keeps people doing this work? The individuals' characteristics?
- 13. Where do CMs go if and after they leave your org?
- 14. Where do we see opportunities for CMs outside of voluntary work?
- 15. Is there any movement on introducing this as paid, formal work? Where do we see that?
- 16. Is there a formal or informal pipeline for employment stemming from CM work?

Case Study Questions

The team developed a set of case study questions which were conducted both from an organizational and individual perspective, as many of the interviewees were founders, representatives, or spokespersons for the organization they either currently work for or have worked for. This perspective is reflective in directly addressing interview questions with 'you' rather than 'your organization' or 'organization.'

Mission

- 1. What is your mission statement? What does the community think your mission is?
- 2. What are your organization's guiding principles?

General

- 3. How large is your organization? (staff size)
- 4. Where do you feel you fit into the ecosystem of re-entry, youth mentoring?

Programs

- 5. What are your main programs?
- 6. Are the trained CMs employed by a project within your organization? Or
- 7. Are they only sent to other CM organizations?

Credible Messengers

- 8. How do CMs fit into your programming and organizational structure?
- 9. Which, if any, synonyms do you use for "CMs"?
- 10. How many CMs do you have?
- 11. For which of those demographic groups would you like to see growth?
- 12. Does your organization collect demographic data?
- 13. For which demographic groups would you like to see growth?
- 14. What are their employment terms? (Full-time, volunteer etc.)
- 15. Does your organization have a formal CM job description? (If so, request a copy.)

Recruitment

- 16. Where do you find your CMs?

17. Is there an application process for people who want to become CMs?
18. INTERNAL: What does your hiring process look like?
 - a. What are some of the traits you look for in your CMs?
 - b. Are there formal interviews?
 - c. How do these align with your organization's values/the values of your work?
 - d. Is there a formal scoring system for candidates re: how well they meet the requirements of the position? Formal requirements from funders?
19. EXTERNAL: Are/how are potential CMs recommended to you?
 - a. Where in the community do you go to seek out CMs?
 - b. What are the strategies for approaching a CM?
 - c. How much of recruitment is word-of-mouth (i.e. tapping)?
 - d. What are the main partners you work with for recruiting CMs?
20. Vetting process: How do you know if a CM is in it for the right reasons?
21. What are the no-go's for your organization?
22. What is the motivation for individuals who seek out CM work?
23. What do you feel are the challenges to drawing people into this work?
24. Why do you feel you're successful in identifying and recruiting CMs for this work?
25. Do you have metrics of success in terms of identification and recruitment?
26. Do you consider these best practices?

General

27. Do you feel there is untapped potential for this work in the communities you work with?
28. What does a "day in the life" look like?

Wrapping Up

29. Is there anything we haven't asked that you would like to add?
30. Is there anyone you think we should talk to to learn more?

Stakeholder Questions

Stakeholder questions varied based on the type of organization the team interviewed; questions for the philanthropic sector, for example, were different from questions for government agencies. Once the team limited the scope of the project to the recruitment process, training, retention, and career ladder questions were removed. Stakeholders, thus, were asked the same set of identification and recruitment questions stakeholders were asked in addition to questions tailored to the organization/the organization's area of work.

Neighborhood Benches Focus Group (Wed. April 13, 2022)

1. What is the name of your position with NB?
2. What do you do for work (outside of CM)?
3. Did you go through an interviewing process? If yes, what was it like?
4. What skills do you bring to your work as a CM?
5. What skills do you feel you've developed as a CM?
6. How could the recruitment progress be improved? If you were doing recruitment how would you do it?

Appendix 5: Credible Messenger Survey Questions

The team developed a CM survey with the intention of gathering additional information from a wider net of CMs. The survey asks both for quantitative demographic information as well as qualitative work experience insights. Due to time constraints and reliance on snowball sampling, the survey received under 5 responses. However, as suggested in the Recommendations, CM organizations should collect additional qualitative and quantitative data about their CMs both for internal and external uses. The survey is shared for this purpose.

DESCRIPTION & DISCLAIMER: This survey is an instrument being used to collect information associated with a Columbia University consulting project.

We are a team of 5 Master's students assisting Neighborhood Benches (NB), a small, grassroots organization based in NYC devoted to educating young people from communities of color on leadership and good practices that break cycles of youth incarceration and violence. We're supporting NB by documenting their organizational practices and contributions to the field of Credible Messenger Mentoring, as well as researching best practices of organizations working in the Credible Messenger space.

Part of our research includes uplifting and highlighting the stories of Credible Messengers. The research will demonstrate the diversity of experiences, backgrounds, and motivations that Credible Messengers bring to the work.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in this research survey, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you withdraw from participating at any time, you will not be penalized.

Your responses will be confidential and we do not collect identifying information such as your name, email address or IP address. We will do our best to keep your information confidential. All data is stored in a password protected electronic format. To help protect your confidentiality, the surveys will not contain information that will personally identify you. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only and may be shared with Columbia University representatives.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact [EMAIL]. This follows Columbia University IRB procedures for research involving human subjects. Encouraged response by [DATE].

ELECTRONIC CONSENT: Please select your choice below. Clicking on the "agree" button below indicates that: (1) you have read the above information, (2) you voluntarily agree to participate, and (3) you are at least 18 years of age. If you do not wish to participate in the research study, please decline participation by clicking on the "disagree" button and proceed to submit the survey.

- Agree
- Disagree

1. How did you find your way into Credible Messenger work?
2. What was your motivation for seeking out Credible Messenger work?
3. What skills do you bring to your work as a Credible Messenger?
4. What skills do you feel you've developed as a Credible Messenger?
5. What does a "day in the life" in your role as a Credible Messenger look like?
6. Do you currently or have you ever lived in the community you do Credible Messenger work in?
 - Yes
 - No
7. Which category best describes how you choose to identify your gender?
 - Woman
 - Man
 - Transgender
 - Non-binary/non-conforming
 - Prefer not to say
8. Age
 - Under 18
 - 18-25
 - 26-40
 - 41-62
 - 62 or older
9. Do you identify as Hispanic?
 - Yes
 - No
10. Race
 - Asian
 - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - White
 - Black or African American
 - American Indian or Alaska Native
 - Two or more races
11. Do you speak multiple languages?
 - Yes
 - No
12. Which language?

13. Do you use any of these additional languages (other than English) in your work as a Credible Messenger?
- Yes
 - No
14. Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community?
- Yes
 - No
15. Have you or a close family member experienced any of the following systems or circumstances? Check all that apply.
- Criminal justice (including police, courts, jails/prisons, probation, etc.)
 - Foster Care
 - Substance use and recovery
 - Housing insecurity
 - Mental Health
 - Domestic Violence
16. Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community?
- Yes
 - No
17. How long have you been a Credible Messenger?
- Less than 1 year
 - 2-5 years
 - 5-10 years
 - More than 10 years
18. What are your employment terms?
- Part-time volunteer
 - Full-time volunteer
 - Part-time, paid
 - Full-time, paid

Appendix 6: Sample Job Description

Job description for a part-time Credible Messenger role; sourced from the Osborne Association.

We are seeking a part-time Credible Messenger to join the Youth Services Unit, working a flexible schedule of up to 30 hours weekly. Our Youth Services oversees a job readiness training program; which runs Monday through Friday for five to six weeks. This program also provides case management development and an additional year of wrap-around services. Participants will engage in cognitive behavioral workshops, civic engagements, community benefit projects, service learning, basic carpentry, individual case management, as well as complete a ten-module comprehensive evidence-based job readiness curriculum.

Responsibilities

- Provide mentorship and case management services to participants
- Facilitate multiple group services weekly
- Support the development of community benefit and civic engagement projects
- Support the development of internship, employment, and vocational opportunities
- Provide referrals for other supportive services
- Assist in goal planning and career development
- Conveying any recommendations or challenges to staff
- Participate in team meetings
- Maintain up to date progress notes and data entry
- Knowledge and understanding are needed to use office equipment
- Performing other duties as required

Requirements

- Education High School Diploma, or equivalent Experience
- A minimum of one year of experience working for a nonprofit organization and working with young adults, with an understanding of the criminal justice environment
- Providing direct services to people with barriers to employment
- Strong ability to make connections to educational, vocational, internship/apprenticeships, and employment opportunities

Additional Skills

- Effective oral and written communication skills
- Strong problem-solving skills
- Ability to work with a wide range of individuals and organizations
- Strong data entry skills
- Knowledge of career exploration, case management, internships, and job search strategies

Appendix 7: Technical Methodology

The Team conducted a four phase flow research process in order to analyze the landscape and collect practice information related to the recruitment of CMs:

- Phase 1: Preliminary Exploration & Categorical Research
- Phase 2: Establishment of Baseline through Deep Dive with Neighborhood Benches
- Phase 3: Structured interviews with organizations that host CMs, and individual CMs
- Phase 4: Structured interviews with stakeholder groups

Phase 1: Preliminary Exploration & Categorical Research

Phase 1 included preliminary exploration of the field of CM youth mentoring, policy issue areas relevant to this field, and spaces that were analogous to CM youth mentoring. Issue areas that were explored included: alternatives to incarceration; recidivism and re-entry; and CM workforce development. In addition, analogous spaces were explored to provide context for the Team’s research into CMs. This included CURE Violence, a model that relies on a public health framework to reduce gun violence;¹²² Mental Health and Peer Advocates who provide services and support systems to families raising a child or young adults up to age 21 who is experiencing social, emotional, addiction, or behavioral health challenges in their home, school, community and/or placement;¹²³ Credentialed Alcohol and Substance Abuse Counselors (CASAC) who provide direct clinical care services and substance use disorder counseling;¹²⁴ and addiction counselors.

In addition, the Team reviewed relevant literature pertaining to the recruitment of CMs. A relative paucity of research related to the CM workforce led the Team to expand the search to other synonymous terms used to describe “Credible Messenger” work. The Team relied on a three-tiered approach to uncovering relevant research that included keyword searches in ProQuest, EBSCO, SocINDEX, and criminal justice research databases. The team also included evaluations of pillar CM organizations such as the Arches Transformative Mentoring Program; and Advocate, Mentor Intervene (AIM). A detailed methodology of this search can be found within the Literature Review section.

Preliminary research in Phase 1 led the Team to refine their working definition of “Credible Messenger” and differentiate it from other analogous fields. In addition, this preliminary research revealed the dearth of information available on the recruitment process of Credible Messengers, a concern that was echoed by the client. The Literature Review conducted in Phase 1 provided a scholarly basis for findings and recommendations with regard to the identification, attracting, interviewing, selection, and hiring stages of the CM recruitment process.

Phase 2: Deep Dive

Phase 2 included three structured interview sessions over a four week period from March to April 2022 with NB Founder William M. Evans and Director Daniel Osario to create a baseline study of the organization and its practices. Session 1 focused on developing a map of NB’s

¹²² Butts et al., “CURE Violence: A Public Health Model to Reduce Gun Violence.”

¹²³ Families Together in New York State, “Families Together in NYS | Families Together in NYS.”

¹²⁴ “Credentialed Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Counselor (CASAC).”

existing programs and what impacts the organization sought to achieve. Session 2 focused on NB's practices for attracting and identifying CMs. Session 3 focused on practices related to CM training, retention, and career ladders.

Findings from Phase 2 led to the clarification of the project scope, NB's guiding principles for CM work, a detailed understanding of NB's programming and organizational practices for recruiting CMs.

Phase 3: Structured interviews with organizations that host CMs and individual CMs

During March and April 2022, the Team conducted structured interviews with organizations that host CMs. Organizations were selected through recommendations by the client as well as snowball sampling from organizations and individuals interviewed.

The Team's interview instrument captured practices related to each organization's mission and programs; who their CMs were; how CMs were employed; how CMs were attracted; how CMs were identified; and the potential opportunities and challenges for the field of CM mentoring. An outline of the interview instrument is located in Appendix 4.

The Team also conducted structured interviews and attended a focus group with individuals that identified as CMs to unpack their experiences and gain their insights. With consideration of the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)'s research procedures, the Team spoke to interviewees as employees and avoided asking questions related to any interviewees' justice-system related status. CMs were identified based on their relationships with organizations interviewed in Phases 3 and 4. The focus group was organized by the client. Questions from the discussion for both can be found in Appendix 4.

Research from Phase 3 was compared against the NB baseline and informed the Findings and Recommendations sections.

Phase 4: Structured interviews with stakeholder groups

The Capstone Team also conducted structured interviews with stakeholders in fields that intersected with CM work. Interviewees in this phase were chosen based upon recommendations from the client and other interviewees and through snowball sampling. These included New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) tenant associations, NYC Council Members, educators, organizations that train CMs, re-entry organizations, and experts in the CM field. Interviews consisted of questions about the organization's mission, its work with CMs, whether stakeholders attracted or referred CMs to other organizations, and how stakeholders identified individuals with the qualities to be a CM. In total the Capstone Team conducted 30 interviews over the 6-week period. A comprehensive list of the organizations and individuals interviewed can be found in Appendix 3.

Research from Phase 4 informed the Findings and Recommendations sections.

Appendix 8: Case Studies¹²⁵

District of Columbia Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DC DYRS) Credible Messenger Initiative

Type: Government Credible Messenger Initiative

Location: Washington, D.C.

Interviewee: Norman Brown, Assistant Program Manager for the Credible Messenger Initiative

Organization Description: The Credible Messenger Initiative is a segment of DC DYRS programming begun in 2016 under former Director Clinton Lacey, who led the agency to become a national leader in juvenile justice through a focus on “restorative justice, love and empowerment.”¹²⁶ The program’s mission “is to connect all young people in the care and custody of DYRS to healthy homes and supportive communities, and to provide preventative support to all youth in Washington D.C.”¹²⁷ The program utilizes Care Coordinators, more generally known as Probation Officers, to work with court-involved and at-risk youth and their families to develop a tailored plan for transforming their lives and mindset. This support plan may include connection to workforce development or mental health services.

Role of CMs: The Credible Messengers, also known at the agency as Transformative Mentors, work in close collaboration with the Care Coordinators, and their mentees and families to ensure the support plan is executed. This means the CM steps in where they are needed, whether through making sure their mentee has the clothes they need, connecting them to mock job interviewing, or coaching them on changing problematic behavior patterns. The CMs are also expected to be available beyond normal working hours to meet the needs of mentees. The structure of the DYRS CM Initiative consists of contracts with seven nonprofit providers, who each have a program coordinator, administrator, two lead CMs, 5 to 6 program CMs and one peer CM.

Identification

The DYRS job description for CM applicants, a full-time position, designates required qualifications including knowledge of the DC court, juvenile justice and service care systems, characteristics such as empathy, computer literacy and the ability to work flexible hours and prior experience with youth coaching, paid or unpaid. A history of justice involvement is not a mandatory requirement, and those with alternate backgrounds such as professionals, entrepreneurs and athletes who may be an example of a positive path, are encouraged to apply. For those candidates that are previously incarcerated, the DYRS investigates if, and how, the candidate mentored or took part in relevant classes while incarcerated. The agency gathers demographic data and attempts to match relevant identities when pairing a CM with a mentee.

¹²⁵ Case study information is a result of data collected from the organizations’ websites, news articles and interviews. If un-cited it can be assumed that the information is gathered from the interviewee and has been verified.

¹²⁶ Delgadillo, “Update: D.C. Finally Regains Control Of Its Youth Rehabilitation Services After 35 Years.”

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Attraction

The DC DYRS does not experience difficulty keeping its 70 CM positions full; in fact there is typically a waiting list of potential applicants. Knowledge of the CM opportunity most often comes through personal word-of-mouth, or city initiatives.

Interviewing & Selection

The initial stages of the DC DYRS interview process aim to learn if an applicant fits the qualifications, has been doing similar work previously, and to understand the motivation for applying. An additional screening process is the agency's community vetting, which confirms an applicant's credibility and is performed by a contracted employee with close connections to the DC community. Brown recommends this community vetting as a best practice which has kept the number of arrests of employed CM to two, since the initiative's launch in 2016. Once an applicant has satisfied these phases their profile is passed to partner nonprofit providers with vacancies, who then do their own selection of CM staff.

Offering

Upon hiring DC DYRS CMs undergo a 30-day trial period, in which they shadow a lead mentor including at juvenile detention center and home visits. CMs also complete a required 5-day onboarding Boot Camp, in which they learn the agency's approach, gain understanding of their assigned community, and learn self-care and well-being skills. The DYRS also offers a variety of training sessions, ranging from communications and technology to mental health, which serve to ensure CMs are able to handle all aspects of the position, including difficult or triggering situations. The agency's CMs receive an annual salary of approximately \$47,000.

Lead by Example/Reverse the Trend

Type: Community-based organization

Location: East Harlem, NYC

Interviewee: Antonio Hendrickson, Founder and CEO

Organization Description: Founded in 2014 by Antonio Hendrickson, Lead by Example/Reverse the Trend works in the community to help young people “become positive, assertive adults who have a strong sense of self-awareness and their true potential.”¹²⁸ Programming includes a partnership with the NYC Department of Education to work in schools to help “off-track scholars” with behavioral or mental health problems through social-emotional skills building, restorative practices and sports therapy, escorts home from school to prevent fights and gang activity; community outreach, and restorative justice programming.

Role of CMs: CMs lead the organization’s programming, build community relationships, and use their systems-involved experience to show the consequences of their prior actions and the change that is possible. According to Hendrickson, the organization’s CMs are there for the youth where they are needed, from court advocacy support to late night phone calls and use their “life experiences as a platform to educate [the youth] and make them productive members of society.”

Identification

Lead by Example/Reverse the Trend’s CMs are typically formerly incarcerated individuals, although this is not a requirement. The organization expects its CMs to have, as Hendrickson says, the “heart and sincerity” for the work and it strives for a multicultural workforce of CMs.

Attraction

CMs usually come to Lead by Example/Reverse the Trend through word-of-mouth or gain knowledge of the organization through Hendrickson’s speaking engagements. The individual skills and interests of CMs, such as mental health and drug education training, sociology, finance and artistic practices, like mural painting, are utilized for the organization’s programming, which may be a draw for potential CMs to become involved.

Interviewing & Selection

Lead by Example/Reverse the Trend’s selection process includes a formal interviewing process to determine if a candidate is committed to the organization's mission and work, and possesses the qualities needed to mentor youth away from negative behavior. Additionally, applicants are disqualified if they have a history of domestic abuse, arson or child abuse.

Offering

Once hired, CMs undergo training at organizations including John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the Transformative Mentoring Program at the New School, and Friends of Island Academy, and gain additional skills in areas such as first aid. In terms of compensation, most positions are volunteer, but the organization provides other benefits such as food and housing support.

¹²⁸ “Lead by Example Reverse the Trend Inc.”Lead by Example Reverse the Trend Inc, “

Living Redemption Youth Opportunity Hub (LRYOH)

Type: Community-based organization

Location: Central and West Harlem, NYC

Interviewees): Reverend Maurice Winley, Founder and Director; Dedric “Beloved” Hammond, Credible Messenger; Dorin Hammond, Credible Messenger

Organization Description: LYROH is a community based initiative funded through the Manhattan District Attorney’s Criminal Justice Initiative. Committed to healing the communities of West and Central Harlem, the organization partners with other community program providers to offer a holistic array of programming.¹²⁹

Role of CMs: At LRYOH CMs are hired as leaders who are intentionally included in the decision-making and mission of the organization.

Identification

The organization’s CMs have experience with challenges such as mental health and homelessness, have transformed their lives and as shared by Reverend Winley have the “willingness to go back to the place that originally brought them pain.” Character traits which Reverend Winley includes as essential to the profile of a CM include empathy, compassion, the ability to establish trust, mindfulness, and a commitment to community and healing. While community connection is important, a candidate is not necessarily required to be from the neighborhood in which they will work.

Attraction

LRYOH attracts the majority of its CMs through word-of-mouth, but also scouts potential candidates through its current CMs, including the purposeful reach into different networks to recruit CMs with specific demographics. The organization does not advertise its CM opportunities, although interested candidates do learn of the organization and its CM work through social media.

Interviewing & Selection

The organization performs a formal interview process with a background check for exclusionary offenses, such as sexual abuse, and may include an interview panel with community members, particularly if a candidate will be involved in community-specific work. An additional aspect of the interview process is the discovery of a CM’s skills in order to integrate these into the organization’s mission and programming. Before hiring, CMs take part in an uncompensated community assessment trial period to ensure the candidate can assimilate with team dynamics, and has the needed qualities for the work, such as the ability to resonate with youth and handle difficult situations.

Offering

Upon hiring an additional probation period of 90 days to 6 months ensures new CMs exhibit basic competencies in areas such as communication and punctuality. The organization’s CMs are paid a living salary according to Reverend Winley, which he sees as important to ensure CMs are doing the work from a financially sustainable place.

¹²⁹ Living Redemption Opportunity Youth Hub, “Living Redemption Opportunity Youth Hub”

Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement (CM3)

Type: Nonprofit consultancy

Location: Washington, D.C.

Interviewee: Clinton Lacey, President and CEO

Organization Description: CM3 was recently founded by Clinton Lacey, who comes to the organization with extensive experience leading CM programming, including in his recent position as Director of the DC DYRS and as Deputy Commissioner of the New York City Probation Department during the launch of the Arches Transformative Mentoring Program. Growing out of previous work in the field, including the models formed by the Arches and DC DYRS programs, CM3 supports government agencies and nonprofit organizations across the country that are currently implementing, or in the planning phase of CM initiatives. This support includes advising and capacity building in the areas of recruitment, training, credentialing and support of CMs.

Role of the CMs: CM3 does not directly employ its own CMs, but rather works with local organizations to hire, train and support credible messengers. CM3 partners with these organizations by providing training, technical assistance, operational support, etc. The CM3 model is based on supporting and positioning CMs to be transformative mentors, life coaches and co-navigators who are involved in programming and hired into roles beyond direct mentoring work. In addition to the direct work with youth and families, the CM3 model prepares CMs to be part of system culture and policy change, impacting internal decisions to create systems change, as opposed to the disconnected impact of single initiatives. Lacey also sees CMs as working beyond youth rehabilitation, such as family or senior mentors.

Identification

Lacey identifies CMs as mentors who are transformative in their own lives and use their experience to impact the lives of young people by breaking harmful cycles. In his opinion there is no lack of potential CMs in marginalized communities who can be considered a “raw resource” who are “systems impacted, survived that experience, and are already contributing to the healing process.”

Attracting

From Lacey’s experience at Arches and the DC DYRS, one of the key reasons government agencies face challenges is due to the organization being disconnected from the community. For this reason CM3 recommends the model used at DC DYRS, which is to partner with community-based organizations as implementing partners. Relationships with local, grassroots organizations who already know the people that fit the role of a CM is the preferred strategy to recruiting CMs in a top-down approach.

Interviewing & Selection

CM3 advises organizations to perform formal background checks to screen for exclusionary offenses (sexual offenses and/or crimes against children), as well as community vetting to confirm a candidate is portraying themselves accurately and is completely extricated from criminal or otherwise negative or destructive activity.

Offering

Once hired CM3 recommends organizations maintain program integrity through a commitment to the health and well-being of its CMs, which includes living wages, full-time employment, formal benefits and access to support and training.

Incarcerated Nation Network

Type: Community-based organization

Location: Bronx, NYC

Interviewee: Five Mualimm-ak, President and CEO

Organization Description: The Incarcerated Nation Network is a grassroots, movement building organization founded by a collective of post-incarcerated leaders. Over the past ten years, the organization has expanded into a network of nonprofits and for profits working on community-based solutions for justice impacted people and alternatives to incarceration for young people. The organization uses a variety of methods and incubates a multitude of projects to advance its mission, including policy influencing, conferences, university teaching, film creation, student union building, housing, network building and social enterprise.

Role of their CMs: The Incarcerated Nation Network is home to the Incarcerated Nation Credible Messenger Institute (INCM), which offers training courses to reentering individuals to become the CM staff for the organizations that are part of the Incarcerated Nation Network. INCM grew out of Mualimm-ak's experience collaborating on the launch of the Institute for Transformative Mentoring at the New School. INCM also works as an incubator to train people who are beginning their own projects.

Identification

Mualimm-ak identifies CMs as individuals who are fit to influence young people because they are mentoring the younger versions of themselves. He also noted that these individuals often have the desire to create positive change upon re-entry from incarceration, but because of negative stigma, have few opportunities to do so. Working as a CM with Incarcerated Nation provides these individuals with the needed opportunity.

Attraction

Incarcerated Nation Network does not actively recruit; CM candidates generally arrive through the organization's networks. INCM has an adaptive approach to its training and forms the curriculum to fill in gaps for specific groups of people who may be excluded from typical CM training, or to tailor training to certain groups or projects, such as a recently launched all girl curriculum. Mualimm-ak sees a need for more elders, young adults and people with diverse gender and sexual identities, as well as CMs who focus on mental health to enter the field.

Interviewing & Selection

Prior to beginning training with INCM students take part in interviews, ranging from 1 to 2 hours, which give instructors an insight into students' experiences and trauma to then help them transform their personal story into a tool to help others. Mualimm-ak noted that there are not any exclusionary restrictions for those accepted into the program.

Offering

Incarcerated Nation Network hires CM leaders to come together to build internal CM institutes for other organizations for which they are contracted; these CM alumni help craft mission-specific training for these organizations. The organization does not typically compensate its CMs, although according to Mualimm-ak, Title V Maternal and Child Health Block Grant funding may be used to compensate CMs for related part-time work.