

Mentoring Children of Promise

Interim evaluation findings

DECEMBER 2011

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Summary

Volunteers of America of Greater New Orleans Mentoring Children of Promise (MCP) program has been providing mentoring services to children of incarcerated parents since 2004. The goal of this program is to create the right conditions for children of prisoners to reach their full potential. In 2010, Volunteers of America of Greater New Orleans was awarded funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to conduct a multi-year process evaluation of this program. VOA has contracted with Wilder Research to document the program's service model and identify implementation factors that are most critical to the program's success. Below are some of the evaluation findings.

- MCP served approximately 170 youth and their families in 2011. Over half were male and nearly 60 percent were young children between the ages of 4-7.
- 53 percent of mentors have been with the program for under a year and 25 percent have been mentors for over two years.
- 100 percent of youth participants had at least 12 hours of regular mentor contact per quarter.
- Youth participants report high levels of program satisfaction. All youth stated that being in the program makes them happy.
- 100 percent of caregivers felt that their relationship with their child had been strengthened or improved as a result of the program.
- Mentors are also satisfied with their participation in the program, with 73 percent describing their mentoring experience as “very rewarding.”
- The MCP program has many assets including passionate leadership, experienced staff, and a well-defined organizational structure.
- Areas for program improvement that were noted during Wilder's first site visit included underutilization of some program resources and services and managing reporting requirements. The MCP program has already made several program modifications to begin addressing these issues.

Introduction

Background and purpose of the MCP program

In 2007, there were more than 1.7 million children with a mother or father in jail or prison¹. More than 7 million children—approximately one tenth of the nation’s young people—had a parent under supervision by the criminal justice system. When parents are incarcerated, their arrest and imprisonment often have a profound, negative impact on their minor children. Generally impoverished to begin with, most children of prisoners become even poorer upon their parents’ arrest. They exhibit high rates of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress and attention disorders. They are also at increased risk of homelessness, household disruption, school failure and delinquency.

Numerous studies have shown that mentoring programs can have significant benefits for at-risk youth like children of prisoners. Mentoring increases the likelihood of regular school attendance and academic achievement. It also decreases the chances of engaging in self-destructive or violent behavior. A trusting relationship with a caring adult can often provide stability and have a profound life-changing effect on the child.

Volunteers of America of Greater New Orleans’ Mentoring Children of Promise (MCP) program have been providing mentoring services to the children of incarcerated parents since 2004. The overarching goal of the Mentoring Children of Promise program is to create the right conditions for children of prisoners to reach their full potential. Specifically the MCP program seeks to help children develop greater self-assurance in four areas that are critical to creating a happy, healthy, and successful life:

- **Competence:** being able to do something well
- **Usefulness:** having something to contribute
- **Belonging:** being part of a community and having a relationship with caring adults
- **Power:** having control over one’s future

¹ U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics

MCP carries out this mission by providing at-risk youth, ages 4-18, with quality, long-term mentors. It also provides support to children and their families via a broad network of social services and community supports. Since its inception seven years ago, the program has served almost 700 children and their families. It has also demonstrated noteworthy success in creating and sustaining long-lasting mentoring relationships—a challenge many other federally funded mentoring programs have struggled to overcome.

Background and purpose of this report

In recognition of the MCP program's achievements, in 2010 the program's chief sponsor — the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—awarded Volunteers of America of Greater New Orleans supplementary funding to carry out a multi-year process evaluation of the program. The evaluation is being conducted by Volunteers of America's national research partner—the St. Paul, MN-based nonprofit, Wilder Research. This report summarizes Wilder's findings from the first year of evaluation activities.

Research methods

Study design

The goal of Wilder Research's process evaluation is to clearly document VOA-GNO's service model and to identify the implementation factors that are most critical to the program's successful outcomes. Specifically, Wilder is collecting information on:

- The program's accomplishments and successes in achieving its stated outcomes
- Basic program characteristics (e.g., information on organizational structure, partnerships, and services)
- Staff and volunteer characteristics (e.g., information on staffing patterns, staff and volunteer demographics, educational attainment, and prior relevant experience)
- Children and families served (e.g., demographic information on participating families, participants' service needs, referral sources, and service utilization patterns)
- Mentor and mentee recruitment and engagement strategies
- Implementation challenges and successes
- Other implementation issues.

Data sources

The findings of this initial (Year 1) report are based on several data sources including:

- A 3-day site visit conducted by Wilder Research staff in February 2011
- In-person and telephone interviews with selected program staff, site coordinators, and participating mentors, mentees, and caregivers.
- A thorough review of participant case files, program work plans, and other internal program documentation
- VOA-GNO's quarterly reports to the federal government
- Participant satisfaction surveys distributed to mentors, mentees, and caregivers

Additional data collection activities are planned for the second year of the process evaluation (2012).

Evaluation findings to date

Basic program characteristics

Services provided

MCP takes a strength or asset-based approach to mentoring. Its goal is to build the resilience of youth by surrounding them with people and things that can help protect them from risk. In addition to matching children of prisoners with a responsible adult role model, the program also connects program participants with a broad range of opportunities and supportive services throughout the community that will help the children realize their full potential.

Each mentee receives:

- A formal orientation session to prepare the child and his or her caregiver for the experience of being a mentee
- A carefully matched , fully trained volunteer mentor
- Regular contact and support from an MCP site coordinator
- Professional social work services and referrals to any other necessary services
- Access to educational events, outings, and field trips
- Access to MCP partner organization programs and services

Program partners

MCP works with a variety of community partners to identify and recruit children of incarcerated parents and prospective mentors. These organizations, which

Partnerships and collaborations

Andrew H. Wilson School
Asia Baptist Church
Bethlehem Lutheran Church
B.W. Cooper Housing
Capital One-New Beginnings Charter School Network
Charter Network
Conquering Word Ministries (Private School and Church)
Desire Street Ministries
Dominion and Power Ministries
Each One-Save One
Ebenezer Baptist Church
Faith and Community Development Institute
Fellowship Baptist Church
Fischer Housing
Forgiven Ministries
Gert Town Center
Guste Housing
Household of Faith Church
Love Impact Church
Marine Baptist Church
One day with God (prison ministry)
Rho Pi Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc.
Second Zion Baptist Church
St. Mary Baptist Church
The Albert Schweitzer Fellowship
The Angel Tree Foundation
Tulane University Center for Public Service
Wilder Foundation

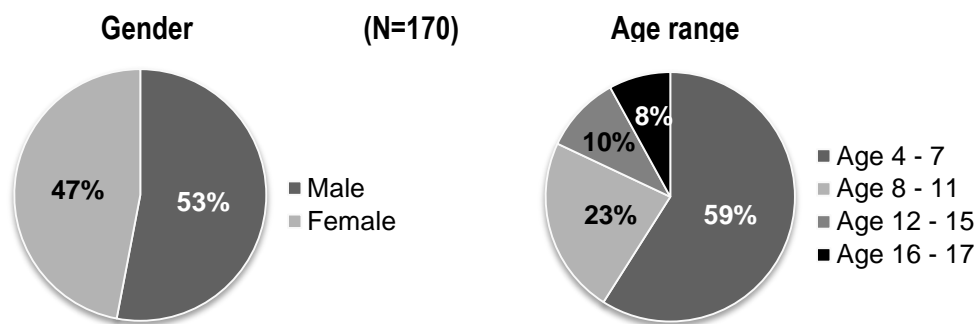
include churches and other faith-based organizations, public housing developments, the Department of Corrections, the Louisiana Heat Association, a university, and fraternities and sororities, have a broad reach and ensure that MCP is a well-known and easily accessible program.

Common recruitment strategies involve distribution of brochures onsite, announcements to congregants, and presentations about the program. MCP and its partners also allow guests of mentees and mentors to attend larger MCP events in an effort to further their reach into the community. In addition, partner programs provide mentees and their families with a wide array of support services. Some examples of these services include:

- Group and individual counseling
- Tutoring
- Youth leadership programs
- Cultural programs
- Health screenings
- Food pantries
- Job training
- Other, miscellaneous services

Basic characteristics of children and families served in 2011

MCP served approximately 170 youth and their families in 2011. The vast majority of participants are from low-income African-American families. Over half of mentees served in 2011 were male and nearly 60 percent were very young children between the ages of 4-7.



Source: 2011 4th quarter report

Staff and mentor characteristics

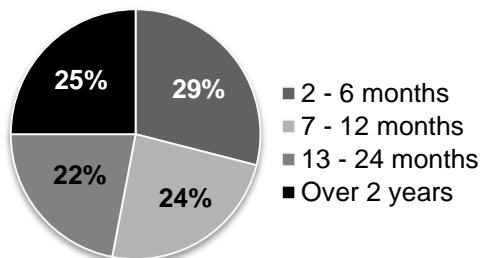
Staff profile

Like the program’s participants, the MCP program’s staff is almost entirely African-American. Full time staff includes the Program Manager, who is a social worker, a Mentoring Services Navigator, and the MCP Case Manager. Many of the site coordinators/part-time staff are experienced clergy or youth workers. Many of the volunteers and site coordinators also have strong ties to local churches and other faith-based institutions in the Greater New Orleans area, and these institutions have played vital role in engaging and recruiting program participants.

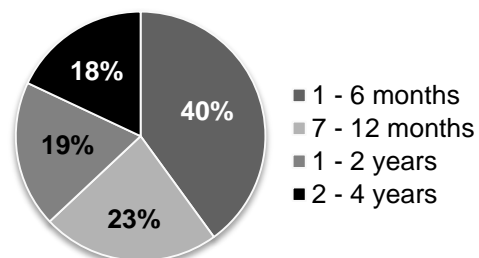
Mentor profile

The MCP program continually seeks to expand its pool of potential mentors, and, as a result, (53%) of the program’s current mentors are relatively new to the program—having joined within the last twelve months. However, twenty-two percent have been participating in MCP for 1-2 years and one quarter have participated in the program for over 2 years. In contrast, most federally funded mentoring programs struggle to retain participants for over six months.

Mentor time with program (N=106)



Length of time mentor has been with mentee



“Sometimes we just talk-she calls and asks me about her homework. She knows she can call me anytime and I will be there for her. I can hear the smile over the phone that comes with communication/relationship/rapport. It’s just the presence, being there, our connection that makes the difference. She’ll just call and tell me about her problems, her friends. It’s not DOING something all the time, it’s just being there.”

- Mentor

Because the program is constantly recruiting new participants, most active mentor-mentee relationships are under one year old (63%). However, 37 percent have lasted at least one year—the minimum amount of time that research suggests is required for mentoring to have a significant impact on participants—and almost 20 percent of matches are over 2 years old. Most mentors are women and the vast majority are African American (97%). Nearly all mentors live in either Orleans or Jefferson Parish.

Participant perspectives

As stated previously, the MCP program has achieved noteworthy success in providing children of incarcerated parents with relatively stable, enduring mentoring relationships. The program initiated 170 new such relationships in 2011 alone.

In mid-2011 program staff distributed participant satisfaction surveys to all of the program's active mentors, mentees, and caregivers; and 107 completed satisfaction surveys were eventually submitted to Wilder Research. In October 2011, Wilder also conducted interviews with a small sample of mentors, mentees, and children's caregivers to gather their impressions of the MCP program. The results of these surveys and interviews further suggest that the program is having a meaningful impact on the lives of program participants.

Satisfaction survey results

Results from the 2011 mentee satisfaction survey clearly indicate that mentees have a positive perception of MCP with 100 percent of youth reporting that participating in the program makes them happy. Nearly all youth under age 12 (97%) and most youth ages 12-18 (76%) also reported that enjoyed spending time with their mentor.

Caregivers and mentors also perceived the program positively with 100 percent of caregivers indicating that their relationship with their child has been strengthened or improved as a result of the participating in the program. Over half of caregivers (64%) believe that the mentor has definitely made a positive difference in their child's life.

Mentors expressed similar degrees of satisfaction with 73 percent describing their mentoring experience as "very rewarding."

Satisfaction survey results

| Youth | N=107 |
|---|--------------|
| Youth under 12: | |
| Being in the program makes them happy | 100% |
| Enjoy spending time with their mentor | 97% |
| Feel confident when they are with their mentor | 96% |
| Trust their mentor's advice | 87% |
| Believe that their mentor has made a difference in their life | 84% |
| Had at least 12 hours of regular mentor/mentee contact during the quarter | 100% |
| Youth 12 to 18: | |
| Being in the program makes them happy | 100% |
| Having a mentor is making a positive difference in their life | 98% |
| Feel confident with they are with their mentor | 81% |
| Trust their mentor's advice | 79% |
| Been in the mentoring program at least 6 months | 76% |
| Enjoy spending time with their mentor | 76% |
| Find it easy to talk to their mentor | 71% |
| Had at least 12 hours of regular mentor/mentee contact during the quarter | 100% |
| | |
| Caregivers | N=107 |
| Relationship with child has been strengthened or improved as a result of the program | 100% |
| Believe that the program's goals and requirements are clear | 100% |
| Were made aware of additional resources/services for their family | 68% |
| Believe that the mentor has definitely made a positive difference in their child's life | 64% |
| | |
| Mentors | N=107 |
| Expressed having a close relationship with their mentees | 89% |
| Described the overall quality of their mentoring experience to date as "very rewarding" | 73% |

Interview results

Wilder staff conducted four in-depth interviews with mentors in February 2011. Mentors were asked questions about their motivation for participating in MCP, how they felt about the program's orientation process and their relationship with their mentee and mentee's caregiver. They were also asked if they had any suggestions for program improvement. The following are some of the major themes that emerged from the interviews:

- The main pathways to becoming a MCP were based on close relationships with children in general and a personal response to the perceived needs of the children in their community. One mentor explains:

“A man I knew, someone my age, went to prison. I became close to his children during that time. I guess I felt like [becoming a mentor] was a way to give back, to formalize that kind of relationship.”

- Mentees felt that the orientation and training process, coupled with ongoing support from program staff proved to be valuable in fostering healthy relationships with their mentees.

“They were very upfront about everything. I had a lot of questions, typical I'm sure, and they answered them all. I thought their discussion about boundaries was especially good, you know, what you should do or should not do for the kids. I was pleased with my match; I'm working with a good kid.”

- Several of the mentees felt that introducing their mentees to new activities and experiences was an essential part of their role as a mentor. One mentor describes the activities he does with his mentee:

“We've gone fishing on the gulf: he didn't really want to go, but I talked him into it a little, and offered him some reassurance. In the end, it was successful day. He enjoyed it. That's my job: to introduce him and get him to explore or try different things-that he may or may not be interested in.”

- Overall mentors were pleased with the program and their role, but offered the following suggestions for improvement:

“Update form (web-based)”

“A lot of times there are issues with the parents, that's why the program exists, in a sense. But it's difficult to connect with children because you rely on the parents to get that going and sometimes that doesn't happen.”

“More financial support for the program activities and for the kids. Even mentors are losing their jobs so more opportunities that could be funded so we can expose kids to new things.”

“My only suggestion is that (all) mentors should encourage their mentees to think about higher education and school, and how it can be the ticket to a better life. I wish more mentors tried to infuse that in their [mentee’s] thinking because it isn’t emphasized enough at home. Maybe just encourage more conversation about their strengths, how they’re doing at school.”

Formal recognition of the MCP program’s contributions

In addition to receiving strong endorsements from its program participants, in recent years the MCP program has been formally recognized with a number of public service awards and formal accreditations. These include:

- A special award for Excellence from the Association of Black Social Workers in New Orleans- for Youth Program
- A special award for Excellence from the U.S. Administration for Children and Families
- Formal accreditation by CAR (Commission Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities)
- The Annie E. Casey’s Foundation – Annual Family Strengthening Award

Possible contributing factors to the program’s success to date, as well as some potential challenges to further growth, are outlined in the next section of this report.

Observed program strengths

Because this process evaluation is still in its early phase (Year 1 of a 3-year study), it is not yet possible to identify all of the factors that have contributed to the MCP program’s successes or that may be crucial for future replication efforts. However, during the 2011 site visit to New Orleans, Wilder Research staff identified the following clear strengths and assets within the MCP program structure, personnel, and processes:

- **Energetic, passionate leadership:** The program manager has served as a strong and effective program champion since assuming responsibility for the program.
- **Leadership by example:** Every senior staff member and partner lead involved in MCP is expected to serve as mentor themselves—an approach which both demonstrates the staff’s commitment to the program and helps them better understand the needs of the children and families the program serves.

■ **Senior staff and partners bring significant, relevant experience and resources to the program:** All of the staff and partner organizations involved in the initiative have been carefully selected because of their well-established experience working with children and youth and families in crisis—as a result the partners bring an enormous wealth of expertise and resources to the project and are able to respond the needs of participating children in diverse and creative ways.

■ **Senior staff and partner leads appear to have extremely strong working and personal relationships:** As well-established community activists with strong roots in local African American churches, many of the key players in the VOA-GNO program have known and worked together on social/community justice initiatives for years. This has enabled them form an unusually strong and flexible “mentoring collaborative” in which the partner organizations routinely work together and pool their resources and expertise to meet the specific needs of the children and families they serve in their local communities. By “leveraging” their relationships and resources in this way, the collaborative has been able to provide most participants with fairly comprehensive, customized wraparound services without relying heavily on support from the broader VOA-GNO organization.

“Anytime I have questions I can call [staff name] and she will let me know what to do and explain it to me. Any questions, she’ll help me. She never stops; the center of attention is always on the children. Sun up to sunset, she’ll get it done. She’s really engaged with the kids. She loves those kids.”

-Mentor

■ **There is a clear and well-defined organizational structure guiding the program:** Unlike in many other mentoring networks, the members/partner organizations involved in the VOA-GNO program meet regularly (once a month) to discuss both the program’s requirements and their activities. They are also regularly provided with new training materials and information concerning the program, and they are continually updated about the program’s formal reporting requirements. Lines of communication and authority are also well defined within the program, with most partner organizations reporting that they know exactly who to contact about different issues/situations and that they are always able to reach their Site Coordinator or the Program Manager, as needed.

■ **Clear and appropriate goals and expectations are set for all staff and partner organizations:** With input from the staff and partners themselves (e.g., through self-assessments and self-defined action plans), the Program Manager sets clear recruitment targets and other goals for all program staff and partners. This allows the program to easily measure its progress over time and to engage in continuous improvement activities and a reconsideration of strategies and approaches where necessary.

Observed areas for improvement

During the site visit, Wilder staff also identified the following potential areas for program strengthening and growth:

- **Possible underutilization of the program’s case manager and navigator by some community partners:** At the time of Wilder’s site visit, relatively few of the staff and partner organizations appeared to be working closely with the case manager or navigator. Several of the partners said they would like more information about how the “case management” and wraparound services component of the mentoring program are supposed to work.²
- **Possible underutilization of VOA-GNO’s broader network of services.** Few partner organizations and program staff receive significant support from other local VOA programs and services (such as the family resource center). The exact relationship of the VOA-GNO MCP program to the larger local VOA-GNO organization is one aspect of the program requiring further examination at this time.
- **Possible inconsistencies in the level of one-on-one mentoring being provided to participating children:** The amount of one-on-one mentoring contact individual children were experiencing seems to vary widely depending on the needs of the child, their family, and the partner organization. The VOA-GNO program may need to take special pains to document and ensure that all of its partners are actually meeting the federally mandated requirements that MCP funds be used to support on one-on-one mentoring matches.
- **Mounting reporting requirements:** Partner organizations they would appreciate the opportunity to report their data electronically, including the ability to apply online and allow partners to receive and submit documents electronically. Wilder’s staff will be working with the Program Manager and other project staff to address some of these issue in the next quarter.

² Since this area for improvement was first identified, the program has made some changes to address this issue. The program’s case manager now routinely contacts all partners to make them aware of his services, and the program’s Navigator has had her position redefined. Future reports will track the effects of these changes over time.

Conclusions and issues to consider

Wilder Research's first year of evaluative activities suggest that the MCP program continues to effectively match children of incarcerated parents with appropriate adult role models, and suggests that a significant portion of the program's matches involve high quality relationships that are being sustained over time.

Much of the program's success appears to rest on its energetic and impassioned leadership, its experienced program staff, and its strong network of committed partner organizations—all of whom contribute to creating an extensive community-based support network for participating children and their families.

The specific elements of the MCP program's service model, additional information about the program's successes and challenges, and specific recommendations for program improvement and replication will be further expanded on in future semi-annual and annual process evaluation reports.

Future reports will also examine the program's success in responding to recent cuts in federal funding for the Mentoring Children of Prisoner's program—including its development of alternate funding sources and its creation of a statewide network of partners that are invested in supporting mentoring programs for children of prisoners.