



**2022 Organization Changemaker Award Winner  
Youth Shelter Program of Westchester**

**Issue and Case for Change**

Young people who become involved with the criminal legal system are often face a myriad of seemingly insurmountable issues - from struggling with mental health, substance use issues and addictions to hunger and poverty. Many have a history of trauma or have witnessed or are survivors of violence. All have been failed by traditional systems that do not examine or understand the root causes of the issues and circumstances that too often bring young people of color into the criminal legal system. These systems – which negatively and disproportionately impact Black and Brown people and people who are low-income - often foster their lifelong involvement in the criminal justice system.

The Youth Shelter Program of Westchester, a diversion and alternative to incarceration program, is designed to prevent involvement in a prison pipeline that wastes human potential. YSOW offers second chances, save lives and promotes safe and healthy communities for all people while holding people accountable for their actions.

The Youth Shelter Program of Westchester (YSOW) is the only organization one of its kind throughout New York State to serve as an alternative to incarceration for youth ages 18-24 within the criminal justice system. It operates as a community-based homelike alternative to incarceration for young men awaiting disposition or who have been sentenced on various criminal charges through the Westchester County Court System. Incorporated in 1975, the shelter provides its residents with food, shelter, medical care, psychological counseling,

substance use treatment, state certificated high school education administered by the Southern Westchester BOCES, social and recreational programs, positive involvement in the community and an environment that emphasizes respect, discipline, structure, and responsibility, and fosters a team-centered healing approach.

*As one resident put it, “Why did I need to get in trouble with the law to access all these services?”*

Post-release and non-residential programming for justice involved youth is provided through the LEAD Academy, and includes community-based aftercare programming to ensure that youth are positively reintegrating back into their communities of origin and to reduce their chances of recidivism.

Over the past three years, under new leadership, YSOW has recognized the need to frame the issue of youth and criminal justice with a racial equity lens, using decades of data and facts to expose the life-limiting and deadly realities related to systemic racism and the over-criminalization of people of color. It is with this lens that change will happen.

### **Awareness**

Raising public awareness of the causes and cures of crime among young people is critical to long-term and systemic reform, and essential to developing collaborative solutions to issues that plague our society and the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

The Youth Shelter Program of Westchester’s outreach, education and community building campaigns empower young people to take control of their lives and communities to recognize and change systems that have life-limiting and deadly outcomes for people of color.

YSOW has two major initiatives aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of key issues facing the community. YouthCRED is a community-based anti-gun violence initiative launched in partnership with Mount Vernon SNUG of Family Services of Westchester that leverages the raw talents, experiences, and leadership that justice-involved youth inherently possess. Through the

YouthCRED program, young people with lived experience with gun violence are trained as CREDible messengers and learn how to create meaningful outreach campaigns to help reduce shootings and cure violence in their community. YouthCRED's aim is to create model youth leaders who can help stop violence through mediating conflict and conveying the message that gun violence should not be viewed as normal but rather as a behavior that can, and must, be changed.

The second major initiative is the Emerging Adult Justice Initiative, a partnership with Mount Vernon City Court and the 9th Judicial District in which YSOW serves as the lead agency to accept referrals, coordinate services, interface with the judicial and legal teams. The mission of the initiative, dubbed "Emerging Adult Court," is to provide meaningful opportunities for resolving criminal cases by pursuing alternatives to prosecution, sentencing and incarceration for young people between the ages of 18-25. YSOW provides the coordination of services and case management, connecting young adults with services, resources, and opportunities through a collaborative effort involving public and private stakeholders to place emerging adults on the path of success and self-autonomy. This initiative is a model of the kind of cross system awareness and reform that can make long term changes in the criminal justice system.

YSOW is consistently examining how to reimagine justice and provide developmentally age appropriate solutions to justice that are grounded in positive youth development. This essentially involved elevating the voices of those most impacted by the criminal legal system to serve as positive contributors in reshaping our collective actions when dealing with justice involved youth. This year, YSOW held a "this is what justice looks like" dinner that was led by youth to share their stories and reflect on the lesson learned during their journey at YSOW. With an outstanding record of reducing recidivism, YSOW has demonstrated that its nontraditional approach is effective in improving public safety, saving public dollars, and redefining the lives of young people involved in the legal system.

## **Collaboration**

YSOW's focus on public awareness has intentionally involved successful collaboration. As a result, YSOW is now a sought after partner and collaborator for the legal system, the courts, the corrections system as well as for entities in education, mental health and employment. YSOW now offers its unique expertise as part of a network of local, statewide and national nonprofit and governmental organizations focused on the criminal legal system and justice reform.

The organization work closely with SNUG (an evidence-based outreach program that treats gun violence like a disease by identifying its causes and interrupting its transmission) programs in Yonkers and Mount Vernon, 914United, whose mission is to support formerly incarcerated people to start a new life on re-entering society, Youth Bureaus in Peekskill, Mount Vernon, and Westchester County, and the New York State Division of Criminal Justice System (DCJS), the Westchester County District Attorney's Office and local City and County Courts. YSOW has co-hosted United in Faith Against Gun Violence, an interfaith prayer breakfast with the City of Peekskill Youth Bureau, a ReEntry Symposium offered in partnership with the Family Restoration Project, and a panel discussion at Westchester Community College called Reimagining Justice, featuring a group of local and national criminal justice professionals talking about our collective efforts to rethink the justice system. On the national front, YSOW was selected last year to be one of just eight sites throughout the United States to participate in the Motion for Justice, Reshaping Prosecution initiative through the Vera Institute of Justice, to learn how we can move from over criminalization to thriving communities

## **Disruptive Innovation**

More than forty years since the founding of the Youth Shelter Program of Westchester as a pioneer in providing an alternative to incarceration for young people involved in the criminal justice system, current leadership recognized the need for further disruption.

YSOW's historic focus on the individual has been critical in helping to heal individual trauma and to providing a path forward for young people involved in the justice system. The model has

been effective in reducing recidivism, improving public safety, saving public dollars, and providing a structure of discipline and accountability for young people.

Yet, the almost exclusive focus on individuals as core to the organizational model needed to change to prevent young people from entering the doors of YSOW in the first place and from becoming embroiled in the school to prison pipeline. Accountability had to include both the individual and *systems* - housing, education, health care, economic - that have for centuries excluded People of Color from opportunities to succeed and thrive at the same level as White people. The Youth Shelter Program of Westchester has been leading the way in making “good trouble” and advancing a focus on social realities and systems that bring young people to the criminal justice system overall.