CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVESTMENT INITIATIVE

Youth Opportunity Hubs:
Fostering Collaboration. Building Resilience.

In 2017, the Manhattan District Attorney's Office's Criminal Justice Investment Initiative (CJII) funded five organizations to create Youth Opportunity Hubs (YOH) to provide wraparound supports and opportunities to young people to reduce risk factors for criminal legal system involvement, increase coordination among social service providers in the delivery of these supports, build the capacity of local organizations to better address the needs in their neighborhoods, and create or renovate welcoming spaces for young people. Managed under the direction of the City University of New York (CUNY) Institute for State and Local Governance (ISLG), each organization/Hub was funded for a planning/pilot year, a 3-year implementation period, and a final data year to support the evaluation of the Initiative. The Hubs reported a total expenditure of $31.8 million. Additionally, CJII invested approximately $10 million to create or renovate physical space to provide more welcoming environments where young people want to spend time, and thus, may be more likely to learn about opportunities and engage in services.

Distinctive features of the Hub model

- Wraparound services
- Case management
- Place-based services
- Cross-organizational partnership
- Youth-driven
- Open-ended participation for youth

Westat and Metis Associates used a mixed-methods approach to capture the services provided by the Hubs and the impacts of those services. This brief report provides a description of the Hubs, Hub coordination and partnerships, perceived benefits of the YOH Initiative, and sustainability of the partnerships and services.

Description of the Hubs

Each Hub was given the flexibility to determine the partners, programs, and staffing that best met their communities' needs, with 15,239 unique youths served between July 2017 and December 2022. Table 1 provides more information about each Hub.

While staffing structures varied, Hub staff were client-centered, relationship-driven, and focused on developing trust with the young people they served. Staff emphasized social and emotional skills, life skills, and leadership skills. They recognized the importance of developing self-reliance and opportunities for leadership and community service.

Hub Partnerships and Coordination

Consistent with the Initiative's goals and design, each lead organization operated as the "Hub" through which partnerships were organized and maintained. The Hubs had varying levels of collaboration with partners depending on resources and services provided, tenure, working relationships, and general frequency of communication.

Both lead and partner organizations identified partner meetings as critical to the success of their partnerships. Partnerships were described as more effective when both organizations shared the same values, culture, and approach to youth development

Table 1: Organization type, service area, Hub model, and examples of services provided

Hub name	Type of lead organization	Hub service area	Hub model	Hub services (in order of prevalence)
Henry Street Settlement	100+ year-old settlement house	Lower East Side	Deployment model with social workers out-stationed at primary partner sites for multiple points of entry to Hub services; subcontracted secondary partners for additional specific services	▪ Employment ▪ Education ▪ Health ▪ Prosocial
Living Redemption	Newly formed grassroots organization led by local community leaders from faith and anti-violence communities	Central and West Harlem	Transformative mentoring and restorative approach using Credible Messengers to engage highest risk youth and based out of a central youth space where partners came and provided services	▪ Prosocial ▪ Education ▪ Employment ▪ Criminal legal ▪ Other (crisis intervention & housing support)
NewYork-Presbyterian	Large academic medical center and teaching hospital with inpatient and outpatient services, network of ambulatory care centers and school-based health centers	Uptown	Drop-in youth center with supportive guidance and behavioral health teams staffed by licensed professionals and advocates with linkages/referrals to off-site partner services	▪ Employment ▪ Prosocial ▪ Education ▪ Health ▪ Other (basic services & supportive guidance)
The Door	Full-service youth center with a particular focus on youth who identify as LGBTQ, runaway, homeless, or other systems-involved youth	Citywide	Expansion of existing wraparound services with staff to provide career and education services, substance abuse counseling, benefits assistance, support for criminal legal, and referrals to subcontracted services	▪ Employment ▪ Education ▪ Prosocial ▪ Health ▪ Other (legal services & supportive housing)
Union Settlement	100+ year-old settlement house	East Harlem	Services based in two community centers where youth advocates work with youth directly and link them to both on- and off-site Hub organizations and partner services	▪ Prosocial ▪ Employment ▪ Education ▪ Other (case management & legal advocacy)

and community engagement. Challenges around data collection and data sharing were one barrier for partnerships.

Social network data were collected in the third implementation year to further understand the contributions of the partner organizations to the Hubs. Results revealed that partnership structures across Hubs varied, as well as the types of resources and services provided by partner organizations. On average, one-third of interactions occurred at least once a week.

Figure 1 displays the strength of collaboration reported by Hub leads and partners. The overall number of connections were grouped by the extent to which the partners reported working with each other on the seven collaborative activities (depicted in the figure). Hubs and partners had the most connections for activities related to regular communication (i.e., via email, phone, or in-person), raising awareness about programs/services, and improving access to services.

Perceived Benefits

Hub leaders, partners, and program participants shared their perceptions of the benefits of the YOH Initiative. Common themes included:

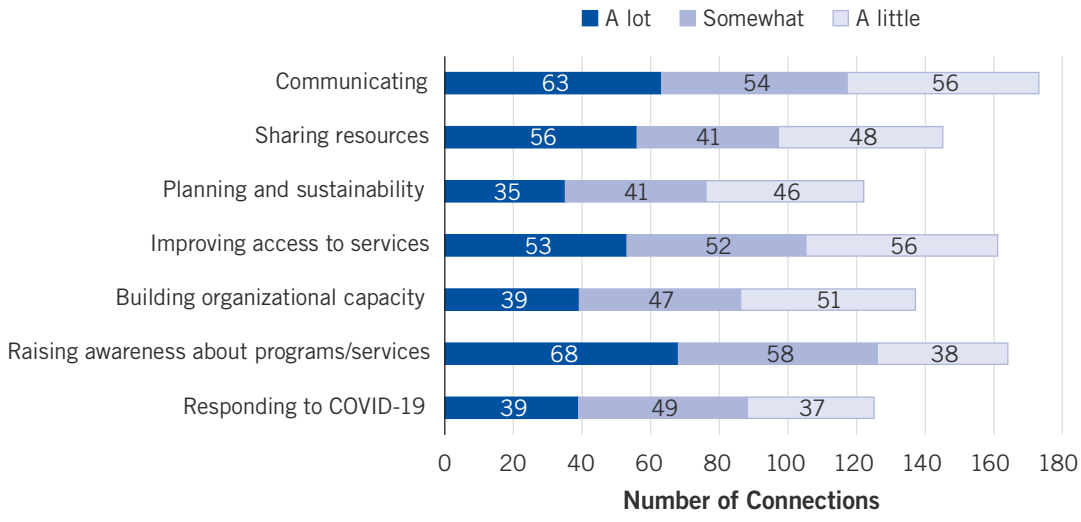
- Hub leaders increased coordination and collaboration among partners. For three Hubs, 70 percent or more of the partnerships were developed during the time of the YOH Initiative; the remaining two Hubs leveraged preexisting relationships, with 33 percent and 57 percent of their partnerships forming after the YOH Initiative was underway.
- Partnerships helped Hub staff connect participants to more service providers. Staff described the connection to mental health, counseling, and social-emotional supports as an especially important achievement. For example, they reported that these supports helped participants thrive in school and employment, build life skills, and learn nonviolent means for addressing conflict.

Key outcomes and benefits for youth

- Had an immediate connection to more service providers
- Reported that staff spoke in a way that they understood; treated them with respect and appreciation; were sensitive to their cultural/ethnic background, gender identity, and religious/spiritual beliefs
- Developed meaningful relationships with peers and positive connections with adults
- Experienced improved mental health including a newfound sense of hope about their own lives
- Moved closer to achieving their career and education goals as a result of participating in Hub programs

> *"So, the goal process, it's really a unique experience for me because I have someone to talk about things with me and they are here to listen and also give me some advice…. So, it's good to have someone to hear you at that time."*
>
> *— YOH Participant*

Figure 1. Total number of connections among partner organizations within Hubs, by strength of collaboration



- Staff reported that the ability of participants to access services designed to meet immediate and basic needs, like housing, food, and clothing, transportation assistance, and economic insecurity, was a critical benefit, particularly at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Hub leaders reported a greater awareness of services among the general population (beyond Hub participants) and an array of community-focused activities and services.
- Hub leaders and partners reported that partnerships strengthened communications, increased referrals, and stimulated program improvements.

Sustainability of partnerships

Social network analysis during and post implementation demonstrated the following (see Figure 2):

- Across all Hubs, the percentage of partners who provided referrals increased over time and remained in place following the conclusion of the YOH Initiative.
- The percentage of partners contributing to all other types of resources decreased at varying levels, with the largest drop in staff time.
- One-quarter of partners continued to provide direct services to the Hubs, though this was only half what it was during implementation.

> *"With the help of the Hub Initiative, we have identified blind-spot areas in programming, and have focused our vision to improve in those areas. Our services and programming methods are more intentional."*
>
> *— Hub Leader*

> *"Since being part of the Hub, the bonds between organizations have grown much stronger. Communication is more open and frequent, and cross-referrals to programs are more common."*
>
> *— Partner Representative*

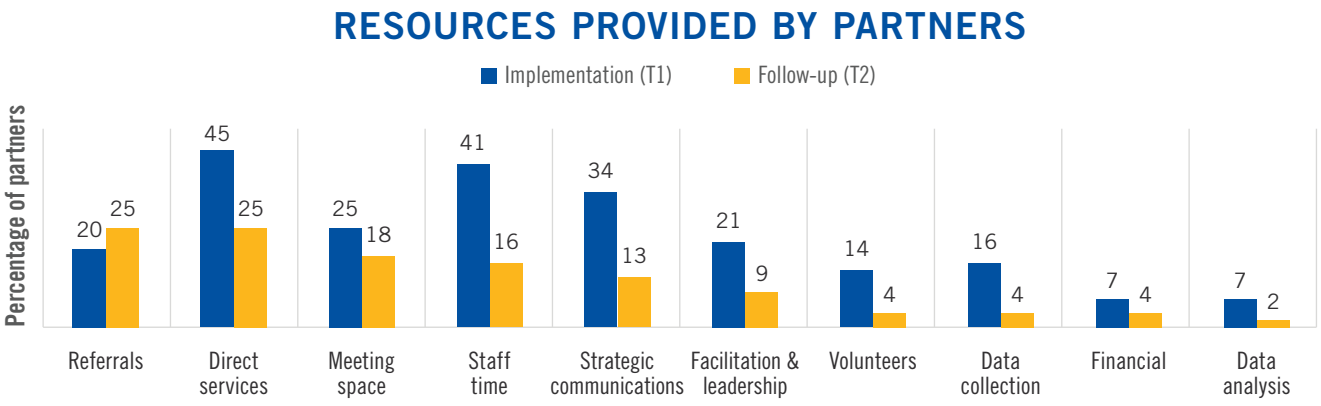
A sense of safety was maintained throughout participants' engagement in Hub services. Hubs increased their community engagement efforts to address public safety (e.g., community anti-violence mobilization and other community events) and took steps to understand the challenges and relational dynamics of the neighborhoods and communities within which the Hubs operated. One lead organization, for example, made sure that the area immediately outside of their building was considered safe from violence.

Sustaining the Model

Although partnerships were considered essential to each lead organization's Hub model, they were also closely tied to the funding made available through the Initiative. As a result, lead organizations found it difficult to maintain the same level and number of partnerships without dedicated funding.

The Initiative provided capital improvement funding for Hubs to create inviting spaces, where young people want to spend time and thus may be more likely to learn about opportunities and engage in services.

Figure 2. Hub and partner working relationships at Time 1 (June – September 2021) and Time 2 (June – November 2022)



Hubs reported that physical enhancements were "a game changer" and a "watershed moment." As one Hub shared,

> *"Building this space out for the needs of this program is going to have a big impact moving forward. Because we were able to really create a space that [met the] specifications we wanted. So regardless of [whether the Hub evolves], this space will always be there."*
>
> *— Hub Staff*

In conclusion, evaluation findings strongly indicated that the YOH Initiative made an impactful contribution to the nonprofit sector within New York City. The Hubs' experiences offer practical guidance for funders and organizations seeking to better the lives of young people through place-based collaboration and demonstrate the importance of funding partnerships in the future.

Key outcomes and benefits for organizations and communities

- Adopted new policies such as paid time off or practices such as specific youth activities through opportunities for sharing information within and across the Hubs
- Formed organizational partnerships providing resources and opportunities to meet a wide range of youths' needs
- Developed a sense of intentional community building
- Improved the landscape of services and supports that were available to youth prior to the Initiative
- Increased community engagement efforts with neighborhood activities ranging from gun buy-back programs to food distribution programs
- Provided safe and welcoming spaces for youth in the community; free from violence