

Dane County, United Way & partners expand coalition to mentor at-risk youth following successful pilot program

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Today, Dane County Executive Joe Parisi and United Way of Dane County President and CEO Renee Moe joined community partners to announce the expansion of the Opportunity Youth Cross Sector Coalition, a program committed to mentoring justice involved youth and those at risk of justice involvement. By expanding intensive mentoring to more youth in our community who are at risk of making poor, sometimes dangerous choices, the Coalition hopes to preserve lifetimes of opportunity and prevent years of consequence based on a few bad decisions.

“It is so important for our youth to have a mature voice in their ear pointing them in the right direction and challenging them to set positive goals for themselves,” said Dane County Executive Joe Parisi. “This program has been able to help our at-risk youth get back on track and provide support in ways that are currently absent in their lives. We look forward to expanding this effort so more young people can take part in the program and know an adult who has experienced similar challenges is in their corner, ready to provide support and guidance. I want to thank all of our partners for helping to make this impactful program possible.”

By having a fulltime mentor who had similar lived experiences and was able to navigate the juvenile justice system, the program’s youth had positive role models in their lives who they could relate to and confide in. As the program progressed, youth began to engage in new activities and experiences that improved their self-sufficiency—be it learning how to cook, applying for jobs, or communicating their emotions. Academic ambition and confidence also became a priority. Many youth

embraced their independence and ability to figure out their own path to a successful school year by setting ambitious academic goals, knowing they could rely on their mentors for support and motivation.

“This is a powerful example of bringing the community together with private dollars to incubate a new approach, testing and then scaling with public dollars once results are known,” said United Way of Dane County President and CEO Renee Moe. “While we always prefer to work upstream with housing, parents, employers and more, we are here to bring the community together to address our toughest challenges – and we need to work collectively to ensure our community’s safety and not lose the magnificent potential of our young people. I want to take a moment to thank the late Cheryl Rosen Weston. She was a law professor at the University of Wisconsin, founder and partner of Cullen, Weston, Pines, and Bach, and a longtime supporter of United Way of Dane County. Her generous estate gift made this program possible.”

The Opportunity Youth Cross Sector Coalition was established in October of 2018 after a series of gun related incidents outside of LaFollette High School and a sharp increase in auto thefts committed by school aged youth in the City of Madison and surrounding communities. An assessment of Madison Police Department data suggests that while crime committed by youth is down overall, the escalating number of incidents has mainly been driven by a group of several dozen young people. In 2018, there were 133 car theft cases filed with the Dane County court, and 27 youth accounted for 90 of those 133 cases.

Due to these youth involved incidents, key stakeholders from the Madison Metropolitan School District, City of Madison, Madison Police Department, Juvenile Court, UW-Madison Morgridge Center, Dane County, and United Way formed a coalition that would focus on strengthening collaborations across sectors to specifically target groups of adolescents who demonstrate a need for immediate and intense support. Starting in October of 2018, the Opportunity Youth Cross Sector Coalition gathered regularly to understand all of the touch points that a young person experiences from arrest, detention, court, and re-entry into the community and schools. Together, they identified a need for intensive mentoring and conducted an eight-week pilot program in the summer of 2019 that included three mentoring organizations and seven youth.

Lack of parental connections, economic opportunities, and community support served as challenges for youth who participated in the program. The Coalition’s

long-term mentor program intends to address these problems through the following solutions: 1) Offering school transition mentoring, focused on getting school supplies, homework help, and to prepare mentees to re-engage with school and increase their confidence and desire to return. 2) Establishing collaborative support with MMSD and surrounding school districts to ensure the Coalition connects with other in-school programs and support channels for youth during the school day. 3) Creating a community of practice around mentoring with a focus on justice involved youth. United Way will convene mentoring agencies and supporters on a monthly basis to coordinate on areas such as mental health, workforce development, and navigating schools and family engagement.

Over the next two years, United Way of Dane County will contribute \$270,000 to serve 37 justice involved youth. Dane County Executive Parisi included \$100,000 in his 2020 budget to help fund this effort. This investment will allow an additional 12 justice involved youth and those at risk of justice involvement to join the program, as well as small stipends for youth participation. Before these investments, the Opportunity Youth Cross Sector Coalition operated with minimal funding. American Family Insurance contributed \$4,500 for programming and mentee support costs, and Dane County Human Services provided gift cards to mentors, mentees, and their families.

One year of corrections costs \$193,000 per youth, a cost that will increase to \$224,000 in 2021. If only three young people do not return to juvenile corrections through this program, the Coalition will nearly double its investment. More importantly, it will transform the lives of youth and families. A resolution to approve Dane County's contract with United Way of Dane County for the program expansion is set to be introduced at tonight's County Board meeting.