

The Choice Is Yours

Evaluation Report on an Alternative to Incarceration Program



“They saw something in us that we didn’t even see within ourselves.”

—TCY Participant

Evaluation conducted by

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2020

The Choice is Yours

Launched in February 2012, The Choice Is Yours (TCY) is adapted from Back on Track, a program developed in San Francisco as a one-year alternative to trial and sentencing for first-time, non-violent drug offenses.

“Once the weight [of a criminal record] is off, nothing is holding you back now.”

—TCY Participant

The Choice is Yours (TCY) is operated by JEVS Human Services (JEVS), one of the largest nonprofits in the Delaware Valley, in partnership with the City of Philadelphia’s TCY Court, the District Attorney’s Office, and Defenders Association. TCY’s pilot was funded by grants from the William Penn Foundation and the Lenfest Foundation, and later through the City of Philadelphia’s MacArthur Foundation Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC). The program’s success led to dedicated funding from the City of Philadelphia and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

TCY participants are first-time, non-violent individuals between the ages of 18 and 30 arrested for possession with intent to distribute (PWID). After a review in TCY court, participants join a one-month orientation which, if successfully completed, allows them to join the one-year program.

The program offers a variety of employment, education, and life skills activities and requires a minimum of 220 hours of community service. Program graduates are eligible to have their records expunged one year post-program if all fees are paid and there have been no further arrests.

Outcomes

In addition to changing the lives of participants, TCY has a positive impact on the justice system and the broader community.



Participant outcomes

HIGH PROGRAM RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES

TCY display high levels of program participant retention from orientation to enrollment (73%).

Program retention is a frequent challenge for intensive programs with participants who juggle competing priorities. Despite many personal challenges, almost three-quarters of TCY participants (73%) successfully completed the one-month orientation and transitioned to program enrollment.

Over TCY’s seven years, 82% of enrolled participants graduated from the program.

The benefits of graduation from TCY are significant: once a participant graduates, charges from the qualifying cases are dropped from their criminal records and they face no further legal consequences from their arrest. Graduates are eligible to have their records expunged one year following graduation.

**OPPORTUNITIES
FOR
EMPLOYMENT,
EDUCATION,
AND PERSONAL
GROWTH**

**Nearly three-quarters of
TCY participants (74%)
were employed during
the program.**

While less than half of participants (43%) were employed at the start of TCY, nearly three-quarters (74%) were employed during TCY. Most of the jobs held by participants (65%) were full-time. Through a combination of soft- skills training and practical skills such as resume preparation, job readiness training prepares participants for the workforce and supports those with employment experience. Staff help participants find job openings, apply for jobs and advocate for participants. The recent addition of a paid work experience to the program structure helps participants overcome the barrier of insufficient work history, which one in five participants report as a serious barrier to employment.

**One in five participants
engaged in educational
opportunities through TCY.**

Educational opportunities available to TCY participants included high school/GED, and post-secondary and certificate programs.

“They give us opportunities that we would never have had in our entire lives. I would not have gotten my diploma this year if not for TCY. I’d probably be in jail if it wasn’t for TCY. It’s taught me so many things since the first day I’ve been here”

—TCY Participant

**Participants report
personal growth
and improved
interpersonal skills.**

Through case management and relationships with staff participants develop and hone valuable social-emotional skills.

“It’s a family...that’s the best word.”

—TCY Participant



Recidivism outcomes

Re-arrest rates for TCY participants are almost half those of a comparison cohort.

WITHIN 1 YEAR OF GRADUATION

TCY Graduates

15%

re-arrested



26%

re-arrested



Comparison Group*

2 YEARS POST-GRADUATION

TCY Graduates

23%

re-arrested



41%

re-arrested



Comparison Group*

*McClanahan & Associates/Urban Institute (2015) report, quasi-experimental comparison group of similar young adult offenders who would have been eligible for TCY.

Longer-term recidivism rates appear to be lower among TCY participants relative to a comparison group of non-participants.

Less than 17% of TCY graduates had a felony conviction five years post-program.

After 7 years, 73% of a comparative non-TCY cohort had been re-arrested.**

**Comparative non-TCY cohort is made up of individuals who failed TCY orientation or declined to participate in the initial TCY cohort.

“Ultimately, the success is making sure that someone doesn’t end back in the criminal justice system. And all of the good things that can happen for people when that doesn’t happen.”

—TCY Staff

Justice system outcomes

Provided savings to the City budget through reduced incarceration rates.

Improved judicial system workflow by removing low-level cases, giving the court time to focus on more serious cases.

Helped shift justice leaders’ perception of diversion programs.

“I think prior to other reforms, it paved the way to prove that diversion didn’t need to be just for misdemeanors. And while this is still nonviolent drug-related offenses and not so-called violent crimes, it was the beginning of the bridge to think about alternatives to incarceration more broadly.”

—TCY Partner

What Makes The Choice is Yours Successful?

Two key themes emerged from the evaluation as core components of the program's success: **program infrastructure and approach** and **formal partnerships and deep relationships**.

INFRASTRUCTURE & APPROACH



Orientation

Long and structured orientation sets clear expectations and allows for personal relationships between participants and staff to develop, setting participants up for success.



Flexibility

Significant judicial discretion in applying program rules takes into account each participant's life circumstances and builds trust while still holding the participant accountable.



Person-centered

Participants are provided with individualized wraparound services (education, employment, housing, financial management, childcare, etc.), addressing needs that may be barriers to successfully completing the program.



"...our staff all now have been trauma informed trained. And instead of us, when we sit down with our clients, setting goals and mapping out objectives to reach the goal, we want to find out what's going on with the whole client, the entire client."

—TCY Staff

FORMAL PARTNERSHIPS & DEEP RELATIONSHIPS

"A successful program to me is making sure that the people you are in partnership with, that would be the DA's office, the Defenders Association and the Municipal Court, that we are all on the same accord and everyone is informed, and that we're operating with the best interests of the clients at heart."

—TCY Staff



Formal partnerships between justice system actors

Formal partnerships with the District Attorney's Office, Defenders Association of Philadelphia, and Municipal Court outline a shared vision and detailed roles and responsibilities.



Deep relationships between staff and participants

Staff are encouraged to develop deep relationships with participants, assisting them in weathering emerging challenges.



About JEVS

JEVS Human Services *Makes Hope Happen* for nearly 30,000 individuals throughout the Delaware Valley each year. Through innovative skills training, job readiness and career services, vocational rehabilitation, recovery services, and adult residential and community participation services, JEVS helps participants achieve their highest quality of life, realize their goals, and live lives with dignity.



About Equal Measure

Equal Measure is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit consultancy working with national and regional foundations, nonprofits, and public entities to advance social change. Equal Measure offers evaluation through a wide range of methodologies program design, capacity building, technical assistance, and communications services to help those who do good, do even better. For more than 30 years, we've partnered with clients across a broad spectrum of content areas, sharing fresh insights and translating good ideas into meaningful change—strengthening our clients' efforts to make our communities healthier, more equitable, and more inclusive.

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

In 2019, JEVS partnered with Equal Measure, a national evaluation and strategy firm, to conduct an evaluation of TCY's effectiveness. The information in this brief is drawn from the evaluation's final report.

Find this and other TCY documents on the web at
<https://www.jevshumanservices.org/the-choice-is-yours/>