



YOUTH ENRICHMENT SERVICES

Community News, YES Updates, Spotlights, & more!

November 2024

YES Makes an Impact at Juvenile Justice Conference



YES Students at James E Anderson Pennsylvania Conference on Juvenile Justice, November 2024

Although interventions addressing the overrepresentation of young people in the criminal justice system are incredibly valuable, they simply are not enough. That's the case YES attempted to make as we presented our research based alternatives designed in partnership with Allegheny County Juvenile Probation offices over 24 years ago. YES has a particular set of expertise since we were the first community-based court appointed diversion program in 2000.

Since then, YES has served over 3500 youth through our extended diversion programs, saving taxpayers over \$1,000,000 through alternative detention programming. In addition to this, YES has also begun to develop preventive measures that work towards reducing youth further persistence in the juvenile justice system, or even being referred to. Through solution-based and restorative justice approaches, YES works to equip youth with the necessary social and literacy skills to navigate different contexts and environments.

As a community-based organization, YES prioritizes engaging not only with at-risk youth but also with their families, ensuring that all parties are aligned. It truly takes a village to address these issues effectively, as progress depends on a communal approach. What sets YES apart is our deep commitment to supporting students who have transitioned out of the juvenile justice system. We focus on their personal development through life skills

training, cultural enrichment, and guiding them toward productive employment, educational pathways, and career opportunities. This aftercare investment is the follow-through of our diversion and prevention efforts, helping to ensure that youth do not re-enter the justice system.

Serving youth from inner-city and low-income neighborhoods, YES recognized the importance of grounding our work in data. The data show that Black youth are the most disproportionately represented group in the juvenile justice system. However, this conversation becomes more complex when we examine the specific demographics within this group. From 2012 to 2015, 70% of those in the juvenile justice system were Black or African American, 87% were male, 40% were from Pittsburgh Public Schools, and 54% were city residents. Black males, in particular, were five times more likely to be incarcerated and 63% more likely to be committed than their white peers. With this knowledge and an understanding that Black males were the most affected by these disparities, we chose to focus our efforts on this population first.



Yarron Arlington, Cameron Jones, Jovuan Hargrove, William Sheffield, & Ramin Hussani (left to right) with Leon Ford (center) at conference, November 2024

In early November, five young male students of color traveled to Harrisburg at the invitation of Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD). Only one of these young men has had engagement with the criminal justice system. The other four have come to YES from different pathways. However, the key to YES success is building communication and engagement structures for all youth, despite their system status. We are intentional about all of our students engagement in their schools, communities, and homes. While presenting a workshop to juvenile probation officers, these young men shared their stories and engaged with attendees.



Mike Pennington (left) Dr. Rebecca Cunningham (right) at PCCD Conference in Harrisburg, November 2024

As YES ends 2024, we continue to be on guard pensively concerned that all youth currently engaged in our programs will make it through the year without any violence or death. This continues to be the heartwork, hardwork, and prayers we request from each of you. That our young people not only survive, but also thrive to enjoy the challenges, opportunities, and experiences that lie ahead for them in 2025 and beyond. Partner with us as we continue to make good on our promise to protect, serve, and nurture our youth. Please continue to join forces with us as we tackle the challenges ahead.

Dennis Jones, PhD

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Empowering Tomorrow's Leaders: Spotlight on the Teen Council Program

At YES, we believe young voices hold the power to shape a brighter future, and Teen Council is at the heart of this mission. Operating under our Youth



Teen Council student working on project, November 2024

Justice Advisory Board (YJAB), Teen Council is a dynamic program that empowers youth to tackle pressing issues in their communities through innovative, creative approaches.

Teen Council members collaborate on projects addressing violence and other challenges affecting their neighborhoods. From thought-provoking presentations to artistic expressions, they harness creativity as a tool for change, spreading awareness and solutions. Beyond these projects, Teen Council provides opportunities for youth to take their work on the road, sharing their ideas and engaging with broader audiences.

One recent highlight was their impactful trip to Harrisburg for a statewide youth justice conference. This trip exemplified the power of combining creativity with advocacy. Teen Council members delivered a presentation addressing the root causes of violence in their communities, showcasing solutions developed through their projects. The trip not only gave members the chance to amplify their voices but also allowed them to network with peers, community leaders, and policymakers across the state.



Teen Council Students in Session at YES Office, November 2024



Group of YES Students at JIC Conference with Dr. Cunningham (left) and speaker (center), November 2024

Their Harrisburg presentation resonated deeply, leaving a lasting impression on attendees and sparking vital conversations about youth-driven change. It also reaffirmed the importance of providing platforms for young people to lead the charge in addressing societal issues.

Teen Council continues to demonstrate that when youth are given the tools and support to innovate, they can redefine what it means to create lasting, meaningful change. Stay tuned for more from this incredible group as they continue to inspire action and progress!

STUDENT HIGHLIGHTS

Jaylyn Holyfield: A Rising Star in the Youth Civic Leadership Academy

Jaylyn Holyfield, one of the standout participants in the Youth Civic Leadership Academy (YCLA)! Jaylyn hit the ground running, being among the first to get started at her worksite at Paulson Rec. There, she's been making a positive impact by helping students with their homework, organizing activities, and ensuring they stay focused before enjoying playtime. Her dedication is evident—although students are required to



complete 10 hours, Jaylyn has nearly finished and is eager to do even more!

Beyond her worksite contributions, Jaylyn’s excellent report card and commitment to the program make her a shining example of the values YCLA embodies. When asked about her experience, Jaylyn shared: “I like what I do and would love to keep working until my manager tells me it’s time to stop. I joined YCLA to help address problems in our city, and I’ve been loving this experience. I want to take away skills like being a leader, a team player, and focusing on the important things in

life. This program is helping me learn about civics, research, and so much more!” Jaylyn, we’re so proud of your enthusiasm and hard work. You are truly an inspiration to your peers and an incredible asset to YCLA.

Staff Highlights

Gratitude in Action: YES Staff Celebrate their Mentees



I have worked with and mentored numerous students over the years. When I first started engaging in youth-centered work, I operated from the perspective of what I could share and impart on youth. I thought I was the beholder of all the knowledge and insight. Through the years, however, I realized that I was wrong. I can confidently say that I have learned more from my mentees than they have learned from me. They taught me lessons I hold onto until this very day. They have continued to push me to be better, to challenge preconceived notions, to hold myself accountable for self-care and extending grace. They taught me how to unlearn and

relearn, how to show up for myself unapologetically, how to be real about my why. I am so glad that the “teacher” has turned student and was able to learn so many pivotal life lessons. I thought I was coming into their lives to help them, but in turn, they came into my life to help me. I am forever grateful. **-Ms. Denise Jones**

Special shout out to all my amazing mentees over the years. I have learned so much from each and every one of you. Whether it’s the latest slang, dance moves, fashion trends, or how to approach subjects with your generation. You all have showed me how to be relatable, compassionate, and also let me know when I was being too pushy or not pushy enough.



You all truly make what I do meaningful. If it weren’t for you all, I would not have stayed in this field. Thank you for allowing me to be part of your journeys- throughout the growing pains and also to celebrate your high moments. Whether it was seeing your smiles when you got off probation, finished a project, graduated, got an acceptance letter for college, or tried something new etc.

You all make my day every time I hear a “Hi, Ms. Danielle!”, “How tall are you today?”, “Guess what Ms. Danielle?”, “Let me get some snacks”, or even when you want to show me your report cards. I cherish all those little moments I share with you all. Keep being great and most importantly Keep being you!! I am proud to be your mentor, and I love you all! **- Ms. Danielle Stewart**

To all of my mentees: I am who I am because of you. Each of you inspired me, challenged me, and demonstrated to me how to cultivate the passion to push through challenges and persevere. Watching all of you grow and learn and become



powerful influencers and changemakers has made everything worth it. Every time I feel defeated, you all have helped me remember and define my purpose, keep prospective, and recharge my passion and continue to grow. You have stretched me to a place far beyond my wildest dreams! I remember each of you, and I am so proud and honored to have witnessed your growth during the time we spent together. - **Dr. Deanna Sinex**

I was a teacher in Virginia in a previous life and being in education you have many mentees. I would like to speak to them. You have changed my life in more ways than I can recount. I thank you for the lessons you taught me in tandem with the ones I taught you. I am honored to have made an impact on your life in any way!

-Ms. Melinda Jones



Over these two years, in the YES, I've learned so much from working with youths, and I'm especially grateful for the lessons I've gained from my mentee. Your determination, creativity, and perspective have taught me to see the world in new and meaningful ways. Thank you for trusting me to be part of your journey and for reminding me every day why this work is so important. I'm incredibly proud of you and can't wait to see all the amazing things you'll do in the future!

-Sahar Hussaini

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