# THE HOLYOKE SAFE AND SUCCESSFUL YOUTH INITIATIVE CASE STUDY

The Holyoke Safe and Successful Youth Initiative (SSYI) offers proof positive that responding effectively to challenges in Gateway Cities sometimes calls for very unique breeds of leadership. SSYI seeks to reach the most vulnerable young men. Those who are "proven-risk" because they have committed crimes using a gun or a knife, they have been victimized by violent crime and are likely to retaliate, or they are known to police as associated with a violent gang. Young men in these precarious circumstances have been failed repeatedly by adults, and are now left on their own to endure traumatic events in various forms. A participant in the Holyoke SSYI program named Carlos makes this clear in describing his difficult upbringing:

> I started selling drugs when I was 11 years old. I got kicked out of school—kicked out of the system. I never passed 9th grade. Basically, I had bad friends and hung out with a bad crowd. I've seen dead people on the floor...a lot of crazy stuff. My little brother and father were killed. My father was in a standoff with the cops and was shot. My little brother got murdered by gang members. I got in a fight and beat up a guy and then got jumped by gang members. I was unconscious on the floor and my brother went in to save me and they shot him. He was only 16 at the time—I was 18.[1]

Reaching teens and young adults like Carlos before it is too late requires leaders with varied life experiences, professional backgrounds, and skills who can bridge their differences and work together creatively. The Holyoke SSYI case study tells a hopeful story of what can be achieved when adults are able to coordinate their efforts in this way. Together, the Holyoke SSYI team is embracing their proven-risk clients with consistent care and kindness, creating safe spaces to deliver effective services, healing years of emotional trauma, and giving these young men a path forward toward a healthy and fulfilling life.

## THE PROBLEM
### A gap in prevention services for young men involved in costly violence

Youth violence runs through communities like a contagious disease. This violence has enormous costs beyond the large criminal justice expenditures required to cover police, prosecutors, judges, parole officers, and jailers. Families suffer losses, both on the victim's side and on the perpetrator's. Exposure to violence can lead to physical and behavioral health problems for residents of high-crime areas—real costs that we generally fail to connect with neighborhood disorder. Other consequences are unmistakable: businesses lose customers, those who can afford to move leave, and property values fall. Over time, violence becomes "normalized" and residents mired in these environments enter a state of "learned helplessness."[2]

For most of us this kind of urban violence is foreign, but like those caught in it, we also tend to view it as an intractable problem. Researchers are increasingly demonstrating that breaking the cycle of violence is achievable with relatively modest resources and the right approach. This is because most violent acts in high-crime neighborhoods are committed by a small number of teens and young adults.[3]

Helping these young men is challenging because they face multiple barriers. Most fit a diagnosis of complex trauma and all of the resulting difficulties regulating behavior, emotions

and motivation, and forming a positive self-identity. On top of suffering from this condition, these youth must overcome obstacles that teens and young adults typically do not face. They often want for a safe place to sleep. Criminal records make it hard for them to find work or continue their education. And many are under the supervision of the adult corrections system, which is ill-suited to respond to their developmental needs and can create even more hurdles for them to overcome.[4]

## THE STRATEGY
### Providing wraparound services under one roof

As the multiple costs of violence and the value proposition for intensive prevention have become better understood, the public health field has sought to develop effective new approaches. In 2011, leaders in the state's Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) recognized the potential of these prevention models and created the state SSYI grant program to provide coordinated services, including outreach, therapy, education and job training, and transitional employment to a targeted population of proven-risk young men.

Holyoke responded to the grant opportunity with a proposal that put all of the programs together under one roof. This would give youth engaged by outreach workers one safe space where they could come to receive all of the services they would need. The strategy was put forward in an application prepared by the Holyoke Police Department together with a steering committee that included the Hampden County Sheriff's Department, the River Valley Counseling Center (a large provider of behavioral health treatment in the region), CareerPoint (the city's one-stop career center chartered by the regional workforce investment board), and the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Holyoke.

## THE IMPLEMENTATION
### Solving challenges with trust and teamwork

In the fall of 2011, Holyoke was one of 11 cities awarded state funding for services to begin early in 2012. Unlike some of the other cities receiving SSYI grants, where there were existing organizations with experience serving this population, Holyoke was starting from scratch. However, the steering committee partners did have a strong history of collaboration, including a long-serving county sheriff with a social work background who had been recognized for his commitment to working with others in the region to provide rehabilitation and reduce recidivism.

Stephen O'Neil of the Hampden County Sheriff's Department explains how Holyoke's collaborative proven-risk model is somewhat unique: "You have to know that law enforcement organizations and NGOs can operate in silos. We can have blinders on, not seeing the bigger picture. Our sheriff is a collaborator. We cannot get the job done alone. We work with over 300 organizations."

To realize the vision of coordinating services all at one site, the new SSYI Holyoke leased the entire second floor of a large old mill building that sits on the edge of downtown. Establishing the space is an important first step to helping young men who have suffered years of trauma in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. Mr. O'Neil also points out that the space is symbolic of the city's commitment to the effort. Many communities, he notes, would locate this kind of program out in the woods.

SSYI staff and youth meeting with local legislative leaders

Initially led by two part-time coordinators, the program gained steam in 2013 when Jacqueline Lozada was hired by River Valley Counseling Center to serve as its first full-time program director. In addition to the program's two therapists who are also employed by River Valley, she has supervisory responsibilities for three outreach workers, one and a half case managers, and two workforce development managers employed by CareerPoint, and two educators employed by Holyoke Community College. She must also manage the relationship with the Center for Addiction and Recovery, which provides the program with data and evaluation services.

This cross-agency structure allows the program to deliver a diverse array of services, but it also creates bureaucratic challenges. Ms. Lozada was uniquely suited to manage this configuration of partner organizations and staff, having worked

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previously at both CareerPoint and Holyoke Community College (as well as the Greater Holyoke Chamber of Commerce, another leading partner). While at times her team struggles with disagreements that arise from different organizational approaches and priorities, they are unified by the mission to help the client.

"We focus on the person." an SSYI caseworker explains. "While we might not all agree on the process that needs to be done, we all respect one another a lot. There are times we compromise, and times when we say 'I will step back from this, although I don't agree.' There is a real person, we think about our guy."

A key feature of the proven-risk model is working with a list of young men in the community identified by the police department as eligible for the services based on their known involvement or association with violent crime. Exclusivity is essential because, as Ms. Lozada notes, participants receive "Whatever it takes, whatever they need to be successful. We make sure they get it." With limited resources to provide this intense level of intervention, the team had to develop a process for recruiting only those who pose the greatest danger.

The program's design made outreach workers the foundation of the model. They are responsible for seeing to it that selected youth engage. They visit young men in prison prior to release and they spend time on the streets and in the courthouse identifying high-risk youth and trying to build relationships with them.

Once an eligible youth agrees to participate, the outreach workers are by their side as the program's case workers help new clients put together and pursue individualized plans for success. Outreach workers then support them as they look for stable housing and get to various medical appointments and court proceedings. Together with the workforce development mangers, they coach them for job interviews. Most importantly, they go to great lengths to respond immediately whenever the youth call upon them for help. The way outreach workers describe spending weekend time with their clients and clients' kids to prove their commitment goes beyond the 9 to 5 duties of paid work. An outreach worker tells us, "They know we care. They listen to us like family. They want to be here."

These holistic services give treatment better odds of success. A therapist with the program explains it this way: "Therapy addresses internal feelings, hurts, and pains, but we are talking here about ongoing trauma, an internal issue that results from external issues. Mental health cannot stand alone to solve their issues. We have case managers to address health, housing, and employment."

The trust outreach workers build and help extend to other staff members is critical to providing effective treatment, as another therapist with the program describes: "It's about the relationship over time and what they're ready to bring to you. What level of trust you have with that person."

The trust between outreach worker and client is also essential to maintaining a safe space. A client might be hesitant to disclose a gang affiliation, but if clients from rival gangs come into the SSYI space together, everyone's safety could be at risk. The outreach workers need trust to gain information about gang affiliations so that clients can be kept apart as needed.

Outreach workers are able to successfully build trust with the young men because they can identify with them. But the histories of outreach workers can also complicate their work with public safety partners. A large body of research shows that outreach workers struggle to balance the information youth share with them confidentially with their desire to prevent violence. This tension is complicated by their own relationships with law enforcement: trusting outreach workers who are former gang members can be very hard for police; conversely, outreach workers often have negative views of how police respond to crime in their community.[5]

Getting the program up and running has required putting together a team that could overcome these dynamics and develop broader support for the initiative from the community. The outreach workers appreciate how their work is leading to different interactions between the police and young men in the program. Holyoke Police Captain Matthew Moriarty, a partner in the initiative, gives credits to the SSYI team. "The staff here point out that we're here to help," he says, "not to come and get you."

The SSYI team is also encouraged by the positive reception they receive in courtrooms, where prosecutors and judges often look favorably upon their involvement with youth and value their perspectives on sentencing.

The program's standing in the community is particularly critical to the effort to build relationships with employers. Unlike some of the other SSYI cities, where existing orga-

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nizations had a head start on efforts to engage proven-risk youth and help them find work, Holyoke's workforce system has not traditionally served this population. Finding transitional employment for these young men requires particularly patient employer partners who are willing to take the chance and give clients time to hone their behaviors and skills for the workplace. Steve O'Neil, of the Hampden County Sheriff's Department, credits creative leadership at CareerPoint for making this leap, noting that not all career centers are interested in serving this population.

The Hampden County Sheriff's Department deserves credit as well. They have taken the unusual step of locating a prison industries program in SSYI Holyoke's site. This allows them to simultaneously provide employment to Holyoke SSYI participants and inmates preparing to return to the community. In addition to these prison industries positions, three of the program partners also offer the young men transitional employment opportunities, as well as a handful of companies in the community.

Holyoke SSYI has been particularly aggressive in developing other aspects of the transitional employment program. For instance, they were one of the first SSYI sites to adopt a skill-building curriculum developed by Commonwealth Corporation.

Compared with other SSYI programs, Holyoke's design gives workers a relatively small dose of transitional employment—just 12 hours per week. This minimal approach to client employment recognizes that many of the youth are not yet ready (or do not have enough time) for more work hours, and provides more resources for counseling and education. However, there is a tradeoff, as paid employment is one of the strongest incentives for youth to engage in the program. If a better option surfaces, out of necessity a participant may leave the program and the support that comes along with it.

Like other SSYI programs, Holyoke's has also worked to develop a two-generation approach with many of the young men who are also parents. Youth receive skills training and counseling to help them repair family relationships and interact in healthy and supportive ways with their children.

A final element of the program is an effort to foster youth voice, a tenet of the positive youth development approach. The team takes clients to the State House to advocate for the program. These experiences can be particularly formative for young men that have not had the ability to influence the forces and events that have shaped their lives.

## THE RESULTS

### Safer streets, successful youth

To date, SSYI Holyoke has supported 141 proven-risk youth. A recent study examining the results for all 11 sites across the state found that SSYI young men were 42 percent less likely to be incarcerated than similar young men not actively receiving the intervention.[6] Available data for Holyoke show a 50 percent drop in homicides and a 13 percent decline in violent crime victimization between 2012 and 2013, the first year the program operated.

For participants, the benefits have ranged from subtle gains (e.g., relocating to a less dangerous neighborhood, having open cases closed without a finding because judges were reassured by program participation) to major victories (e.g., two have gone on to college, 15 have completed their high school equivalencies). A workforce development coordinater, who was once a proven-risk youth, speaks to the most profound effect the program can have: "SSYI saved my life. That is what they did."

SSYI's advocacy work is also effective in helping to sustain the program. The state legislature has remained committed with funding and youth advocacy clearly helped win over Governor Baker, who has become a vocal champion for SSYI. Many participants refer to the advocacy component as having a particularly powerful influence on them as they work to rebuild their lives. In the words of Carlos, the youth whose story we began with:

> I've been to the state government in Boston twice and have met with the Governor. When I meet with lawmakers, I talk about what I went through in life and how important the SSYI program is. It feels like another home. They give young people a lot of support and push youth to get them where they want to go. They show youth how to do it right. I like that I'm getting heard. Now that I'm getting the hang of advocacy, I've become passionate about it.[7]

Thanks to the state SSYI grant program, a fledgling project led by a steering committee is on its way to becoming a mature and sustainable initiative. While the Holyoke program's design creates some adversity for the staff, they have clearly bonded through the effort they have put into overcoming these chal-

lenges. Many talk about the SSYI team as being like a family, and several use the phrase "all hands in." They describe the respect they have for one another and for their clients, as well as the respect they receive from clients, as the key ingredient of their model, and see such mutual respect as vital to sustaining the power of the work in the future.

Another benefit of the program is that it has increased the community's capacity to plan and execute a comprehensive crime reduction strategy. Members of the SSYI team are present in conversations around how Holyoke deploys resources to most effectively deliver prevention across the full spectrum of youth, not just those with proven risk.

As Captain Moriarty of the Holyoke Police Department says of the program's value: "This is a good example of what you get when agencies come together, and they have a plan, and they're able to work together. You get such a great result. There are some hard core hitters now who have a GED, who have a job. Jacqueline and her crew have gone above and beyond to get these people where they need to be."

## THE ROAD AHEAD

### Creating an SSYI Holyoke built to last

As noted by the researchers who assisted the state in developing the SSYI grant, programs that have successfully addressed youth violence have often had great difficulty sustaining their success over the long-term because the model was not built to last.[8] SSYI Holyoke shares some of the same limitations. In order to create capacity where none existed, the grant program supported a patch work of organizations. Sustaining success and moving toward a financial model that is built on more than a single line item in the state budget will require a new structure.

To get to this more mature structure, Holyoke SSYI requires more stability in the interim. Because the program only operated for six months in the first year, the state has essentially continued to budget for the program in six-month cycles, appropriating funds in the July 1st fiscal year budget and then requiring the passage of a supplemental budget mid-year to maintain services. This produces stress and uncertainty for case workers, who do not know if they will have a job or be able to live up to the commitments they make to their clients. It also makes it harder for the program, which is reliant on this single source of funds, to plan and develop into a mature organization.

Other aspects of the road to maturity just require time and sustained effort. For example, the program continues to pound the pavement looking for employers. Ms. Lozada says they are increasingly having success with a "Try it. If you like them, hire them" model, where they cover first month's wages and liability for participants. Employers are interested because in addition to paying first-month wages, the program can provide transportation for their participants, which is a constant struggle in the region. This value proposition should allow the program to continue improving its base of employer partners.

The outreach workers and case managers also describe the need to continue building trust and strengthening partnerships. For instance, they do not have access to criminal records and often must wait over a month for the police department to process their requests so that they can determine a participant's eligibility. In their line of work, this lost time can make a life or death difference. Similarly, outreach workers and case managers are still building relationships and confidence with the County Sheriff's Department. When they visit prisons, they are often accompanied by prison staff to interview potential clients. This can make it more difficult to develop trust with incarcerated young men and draw them into the program.

"Solving complex challenges requires us to think creatively and look locally," said Marylou Sudders, Secretary of the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, whose agency oversees the SSYI program. "The SSYI model in Holyoke demonstrates that by building on community collaborations and addressing violence in partnership with local law enforcement, but through a public health approach, we are not only driving down crime and saving the state money, we have the opportunity to save lives.

## LEADING TOGETHER IN GATEWAY CITIES

### Lessons from Holyoke

The lessons you draw from Holyoke SSYI depend on how you apportion credit to the leadership that has made the program a success.

If you situate the leadership primarily within this steering committee, the case study provides compelling support for a collective impact model, and reinforces the notion that coordinated change efforts are most likely to succeed when organizations coalesce around a narrowly defined goal. In this case, community leaders agreed that they would intensively focus resources on proven-risk youth and work together relentlessly to place these young men on a path toward success.[9]

On the other hand, building a program like Holyoke SSYI isn't a simple transaction between organizations. You don't simply combine funds and purchase it off the shelf. To make it work, it takes leaders who can connect with public agencies at all levels of government, as well as with private partners, community stakeholders, and, most importantly, the youth participants. These leaders need to be able to move nimbly across different spaces, working cooperatively with people who have diverse philosophies, worldviews, and methods of communicating.

A paper published a decade ago by the Child Welfare League of America entitled *Moving Mountains Together* describes the "staggeringly complex work" involved in trying to make the overlapping web of health and family services and the criminal justice system operate effectively to meet the many and changing needs of vulnerable youth.[10] Research examining how teams of mental health workers do this for their clients finds examples of both transformational and transactional leadership.

To overcome the profound difficultly of the work, transformational leadership is needed to help team members approach their clients with optimism that they can succeed despite the challenges. Leaders build a culture of success with their organizations by empowering team members through collaborative decision-making and effective delegation. At the same time, some forms of transactional leadership are required to keep the team within the prescribed boundaries of the practice and focused on meeting strategic program goals.[11]

By all accounts, Jacqueline Lozada, the SSYI project director, has masterfully applied a blend of these leadership approaches to rally her team around a shared vision and prepare them to operate successfully in a challenging environment.

In the voices and stories of the SSYI workers, we capture something even more fundamental. Fully half the team has personal experience with the criminal justice system and neighborhoods infected by violence. They appreciate that their resiliency is special. It empowers them and inspires them to give others opportunities to change. With criminal records and painful memories, these young leaders are still striving every day to overcome their own pasts. They fight back against these injustices by giving all they have to the program and the young men they serve. As an SSYI outreach worker concludes his interview: "I was like them. I grew up here. I went through the same things they went through. Mine is a story of redemption. I fixed my life, I fix other lives."

## ENDNOTES

1 Holyoke SSYI youth were interviewed by the federal government website youth.gov. See http://youth.gov/youth-voices/carlos.

2 For a more thorough description of the costs to individuals and communities, see David Hemenway. "Measuring the Cost of Injury: Underestimating the Costs of Street Violence" *Injury Prevention* 17.5 (2011). Learned helplessness is a term coined for a classical conditioning theory developed by Martin Seligman in the 1970s. See Martin Seligman. "Learned Helplessness" *Annual Review of Medicine* 23.1 (1972).

3 Anthony Braga and others. "Problem-oriented Policing, Deterrence, and Youth Violence" *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 38.3 (2001); Marvin Wolfgang and others. *Delinquency in a Birth Cohort* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

4 The very serious challenges the adult corrections system faces responding to the developmental needs of young adults is explored more fully in a recent MassINC report. See Benjamin Forman and others. "Justice Reinvestment with a Developmental Lens" (Boston, MA: MassINC, 2015).

5 Scott Decker and others. "Street Outreach Workers: Best Practices and Lessons Learned" *School of Justice Studies Faculty Papers* #15 (Bristol, RI: Roger Williams University, 2008).

6 Patricia Campie and others. "A Comparison Study Using Propensity Score Matching to Predict Incarceration Liklihoods among SSYI and non-SSYI Youth from 2011-2013" (Boston, MA: Executive Office of Health and Human Services, 2014).

7 http://youth.gov/youth-voices/carlos

8 Patricia Campie and others. "What Works to Prevent Urban Violence Among Proven Risk Young Men?" (Boston, MA: Executive Office of Health and Human Services, 2013).

9 Michele Jolin and others. "Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives: A Promising Approach to Addressing America's Biggest Challenges" (New York, NY: Bridgespan Group, 2012).

10 Laura Burney Nissen and others. "Moving Mountains Together: Strategic Community Leadership and Systems Change" *Child Welfare* 84.2 (2005).

11 Patrick Corrigan and Andrew Garman. "Transformational and Transactional Leadership Skills for Mental Health Teams" *Community Mental Health Journal* 35.4 (1999).

This paper is one in a series of case studies examining innovative Gateway City initiatives. Each profile explores the unique dynamics of change in small to midsize urban communities, where resources are limited and social challenges are complex. These papers capture the basic mechanics of the initiative. Then they attempt to distill universal lessons for leaders by looking at how communities come together to make their change effort a success.