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Service Strategies and Programs to Help Incarcerated Youth: A Training Program for Volunteers

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**SERVICE STRATEGIES AND PROGRAMS TO
HELP INCARCERATED YOUTH**

**A TRAINING PROGRAM FOR
VOLUNTEERS**

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OCTOBER 1999, GUAYNABO, P.R.

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Created in 1993, the Corporation for National Service oversees three national service initiatives: AmeriCorps, which includes AmeriCorps*VISTA, AmeriCorps*National Civilian Community Corps, and hundreds of local and national nonprofits; Learn and Serve America, which provides models and assistance to help teachers integrate service and learning from kindergarten to college; and the National Senior Service Corps, which includes the Foster Grandparents Program, the Senior Companion Program, and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP).

The National Service Fellowship Program, launched by the Corporation for National Service in September 1997, involves a team of individual researchers who develop and promote models of quality service responsive to the needs of communities. The goal of the program is to strengthen national service through continuous learning, new models, strong networks, and professional growth.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. AmeriCorps*VISTA and Service to America

For more than thirty years, AmeriCorps*VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) members have been serving disadvantaged communities. The program is dedicated to increasing the capability of people to improve the conditions of their lives.

Foster Grandparents are part of the National Senior Service Corps, a network of more than a half-million seniors who are making a difference as volunteers. Since 1965 the Foster Grandparents Program has tapped the experience, skills, talents, interests and creativity of seniors age 55 and older. They serve 20 hours a week in: schools, hospitals, day care centers, homes for abused and abandoned children, Head Start, drug treatment centers and correctional institutions.

B. Brief History of AmeriCorps and Juvenile Programs

In 1998 a group of AmeriCorps*VISTA members joined the Foster Grandparents that were serving at five juvenile institutions in Ponce and Guaynabo, Puerto Rico. As a National Service Fellow with the Corporation for National Service, I have assessed the present programs and practices of the Juvenile Programs and Foster Grandparent involved in the initiative. The purpose of this training is to provide potential volunteers with an overview of the system plus new areas of involvement where they may have an impact.

II. THE NEED FOR THIS PROJECT

Civil rights violations at juvenile institutions led the United States Department of Justice to file a lawsuit against the Puerto Rico government in 1997. To monitor compliance with the settlement of that lawsuit the Federal Court appointed Mr. Osvaldo Martínez.

Besides recommending that new secured residential buildings be constructed and old ones modernized, Martínez made the following suggestions:

1. To implement the “Risk Classification System”, that is, to keep youth who are dangerous away from those who are not;
2. To make sure the punishment fits the crime;
3. To teach juvenile offenders survival skills as well as academic and vocational subjects; and
4. To introduce AmeriCorps*VISTA members, and to strengthen Foster Grandparents projects, within the Administration of Juvenile Institutions.

These four recommendations recognize the opportunity for Foster Grandparents to make a contribution to the juvenile offender programs in Puerto Rico. The training material presented here will provide information of how this can occur.

III. INSIGHTS AND SUGGESTIONS

A. According to the 1996 book *El Crimen en Puerto Rico*, by author, lawyer and law professor at Interamerican University, Río Piedras, PR, Dra. Nora Nevares-Muñiz, successful prevention programs:

- Offer minors at risk the type of support usually received at home.
- Help them develop self-esteem.
- Involve them in legitimate work that improves their quality of life and that of their communities.

B. It is less expensive to prevent crime than to keep juveniles in prison. Professor Pedro Vales, Ph.D. a criminologist with a degree in Clinical Psychology, says that in 1990 the yearly cost to include each youth in comprehensive prevention programs such as those described below was \$800. But, in that same year, the cost of keeping each juvenile in prison was \$16,000, according to the Administration of Juvenile Institutions. That is, twenty times more.

C. In an April 1999 conference, which I attended in San Juan, PR, Dr. Lynn A. Curtis, President of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, offered as best practices to prevent crime:

- Start preschoolers on a program such as Head Start, which should ideally last three years.
- Offer follow-up during the twelve grades of schooling.
- Establish full-service community schools that are open 365 days a year from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., educate the parents, and keep students groups as small as possible.
- Find adult mentors that will work one-to-one with youth at risk.
- Offer summer jobs.
- Create programs for school dropouts that include, in this order: life skills, remedial classes, training for jobs available in the community.
- Have some police live in the community they serve.

D. As part of the prevention program “Safe Neighborhood Action Plan,” or S.N.A.P., Ms. Courtney Hamilton, AmeriCorps*VISTA Youth Liaison Officer in Detroit, helps organize workshops to educate youth ages 13-17 about juvenile law. About them she says:

- Having law enforcement personnel present in these workshops, fosters a positive relationship between the youth and police.
- Role playing exercises help the young ones to see both sides of the issue: theirs and the law.
- Discussions on the consequences of decisions such as what activities to be involved in, and which friends to spend time with, are an important part of the workshops.
- Other events planned by S.N.A.P. for this neighborhood youth in Detroit are: a summer youth employment program, spring seed planting, craft workshops and various sports activities.

IV. TWO EXEMPLARY PREVENTION PROGRAMS IN PUERTO RICO

A. Centros Sor Isolina Ferré, Inc.

Centros Sor Isolina Ferré, Inc. was started by the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity 30 years ago on the ground floor of a small wooden house in Playa Ponce, that served as their convent. Their plan was to take young people involved in the juvenile court system into the custody of an advocate program. The idea was very new and so were the educational programs they created.

They walked the streets getting to know the people and listening to their problems. To this day, community involvement is an essential part of their efforts to prevent juvenile delinquency. In 1970, the author taught English to a group of women there, who were also learning how to sew on industrial sewing machines. Now the nuns run seven centers in different towns, have a staff of dozens, who with 19 AmeriCorps*VISTA members offer activities aimed at community building and keeping youth from using drugs and joining gangs. They also run an AmeriCorps* project with 35 members in a museum-school-community project in Ponce.

Centros Sor Isolina Ferré, Inc. has created a corps of ten full-time advocates, local residents who are trained to: look out for, protect, represent and help youngsters in trouble with the law, government agencies and the community.

The AmeriCorps*VISTA members that work at these centers promote the values of: justice, honesty, self-help, confidence, perseverance, solidarity, respect, self-esteem, love and communication, among the youth of the community. They succeed more often than not, according to an external evaluation, and have received a \$150,000 grant from a federal consortium.

Most of the AmeriCorps*VISTA members are of the community, and not only acquire skills that enrich their own lives, but also become effective community organizers:

- ❑ Planning cultural and educational activities.
- ❑ Referring individuals and families to private and government agencies.
- ❑ Organizing support groups to meet community needs.
- ❑ Tutoring with the America Reads Program.
- ❑ Implementing recreational and sports activities.
- ❑ Involving the Police Athletic League in their programs.
- ❑ Getting school dropouts to return to school.
- ❑ Offering a summer camp for young leaders.
- ❑ Starting Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon groups.

A primary emphasis is the focus on sports as a means to attract boys between the ages of 13 and 21. By sponsoring competitions, tournaments and clinics after-school, weekends and summers, AmeriCorps*VISTA members offer both recreation and an anti-drug message. Sports have also brought unity to diverse sectors of Playa Ponce.

Another important initiative is creating educational workshops to train and keep the youth out of trouble. These ongoing programs include: photography, bookbinding, silk-screening, ceramics, modeling, ballet, art and design, folk dancing and music.

This successful model of intervention, started and still directed by Sister Isolina Ferré, has been replicated in 14 public housing projects on the island. The Puerto Rico Public Housing Authority and HIDTA (High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program) have requested that the AmeriCorps*VISTA project be replicated in public housing projects throughout the island.

B. Jóvenes de Puerto Rico en Riesgo, Inc.

Jóvenes de Puerto Rico en Riesgo, Inc. (Puerto Rican Youth at Risk), which parallels Youth at Risk that was established in San Francisco in 1984, was founded by Dra. Mercedes Cintrón in 1996. They work primarily with youth between the ages of 13 and 18. A staff of three plus six AmeriCorps*VISTA members start out by offering groups of about 30 youth considered at high risk, a week of intensive training in a camp-like setting. In events they call Summit Projects (CUMBRES) the teen-agers participate in physical exercise, interactive workshops and group meetings. As of March 1999, thirty more youth from two very low income communities in San Juan have participated in the Fifth Summit Project (CUMBRES V).

Follow-up consists of assigning a mentor to each youth for the next six months. After this period they hold two activities: "Dreams and Appreciation" which allows the juveniles to reflect upon their lives during the past six months and what they have accomplished; and "graduation" after which many become helpers in start-up programs for other incoming youth.

The six AmeriCorps*VISTA members list their main accomplishments as follows:

- Involved 120 youth at risk in three Summit Projects.
- Recruited 100 volunteers.
- Trained fifty additional other volunteers to help youth at risk in different ways.
- Developed a volunteers directory.
- 90% of graduates have remained in school or are working.
- 97% have had no further problems with the Justice Department.
- Established three chapters of an advanced leadership and service organization (La Orden del Manicato).
- 110 youth participated in an innovative Summer Work Project.
- Designed and developed a project "Cibari Project", to facilitate the transition of high risk students from elementary to junior high school.
- Provided tutoring and mentoring to sixty five juveniles at two "Caney Tutoring Centers."
- Developed project manuals and administrative procedures, in order to facilitate continuity and replication of the project.

- Published a quarterly newsletter.
- Collaborated with the Family Institute in parenting classes for teen-age mothers.
- Increased program revenues from \$21,963 in 1996 to \$248,865 in 1998.

V. BEST PRACTICES BEHIND BARS

A. The Ponce Detention & Training Center

The Ponce Detention & Training Center for girls has been privatized and is run efficiently and effectively by Southwest Key Program of Houston, Texas, since October of 1998. There, among other things, the one AmeriCorps*VISTA member has been able to design a volunteer application, as well as a manual, that clearly defines the activities in which the girls may participate, based on a poll taken among the staff from all areas: education, social services, medical, etc. They all seem to participate freely in every aspect of the work at hand, and because of this type of involvement, they are aware of the role played by AmeriCorps*VISTA and Foster Grandparents, and can offer them their full support.

The combination of a solid training program and staff support contributed to the success of the volunteers' efforts. The Southwest Key Program will provide free training of charge to all AmeriCorps*VISTA members and Foster Grandparents working in the juvenile institutions.

B. Hogar Albergue Guailí

Administrative controls and governance at Guailí. Hogar Albergue Guailí in Guaynabo houses boys between the ages of 10 and 14. The atmosphere at Guailí is that of a Middle School, although some of the boys have committed crimes Types 1 and 2.

The director loves the children and has developed a great working relationship with the staff as well as the 2 AmeriCorps*VISTA members and five Foster Grandparents. He is truly a facilitator.

Another advantage enjoyed by Guailí is the fact that just over a dozen children live there at any one time. This allows Foster Grandparents to work with them on an individual basis. They tutor them in all academic subjects and offer them a variety of handicraft classes daily.

The two AmeriCorps*VISTA members plan and carry out weekly, monthly, calendar dictated and one-time-only activities. For example:

- Weekly trips to the public library.
- Speakers to offer workshops on self-esteem, the effects of drug and alcohol use, etc.
- Special events such as Valentines Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas parties.
- Edit a new bimonthly newsletter.

- Contact in area schools for reading and writing tutors.
- Assist the boys in painting a mural on an environmental subject.
- Collaborate with the with the Guailf's recreational department in planning a summer camp also with an environmental theme.

VI. AN ADDICTS REHABILITATION CENTER WITH A SOUL: EL AVE MARÍA

This initiative, located in Toa Alta, Puerto Rico, is very original in that it involves a recycling project, a center to rehabilitate drug addicts and a home for abused children. It is run by a Catholic priest with a small staff, four AmeriCorps*VISTA members and four Foster Grandparents. Many community volunteers give their time.

After passing the initial phase, the rehabilitating addicts work full-time at an aluminum recycling plant that belongs to the project. Under the supervision and with the support of the AmeriCorps*VISTA members, they: collect used and discarded metal, bring it to the plant, run it through the machinery, pack it and sell it. They also learn skills such as: finger-lift handling, soldering, etc.

The profits from this enterprise support their rehabilitation center plus a fully licensed home for abused children, where Foster Grandparents provide loving, individual attention, for up to six months, to abandoned or abused babies through three years of age.

The AmeriCorps*VISTA members list their accomplishments at El Ave María as:

- Assisting in building and furnishing a house for the children.
- Attaining the financial support of some private enterprises as well as government agencies to cover the cost of purchasing the industrial machinery used in the aluminum recycling plant.
- Helping Father Pedro in the process of buying and installing the aluminum recycling plant.
- Writing the proposals to obtain a loan from USDA, with which Father Pedro purchased an 8,000 square meters lot and the two houses on it.
- Helping to create a conscience about everyone's responsibility toward the environment, by visiting the neighborhood door to door.
- During the seven years this program has been in operation, 100% of the addicts entering the program have completed the process.
- Two ex-addicts who successfully completed their program stayed on in a staff capacity.
- Holding fund-raising activities to buy a van, now used to carry dinner to the town's homeless.

VII. STRIVING FOR A MODEL JUVENILE INSTITUTION

A model juvenile institution should have the following characteristics if the objectives of AmeriCorps*VISTA and the Foster Grandparents program to be met:

- ❑ Education and rehabilitation must be a priority for the institution.
- ❑ Adequate space, equipment and materials must be supplied.
- ❑ Effective guidance must be provided to the AmeriCorps*VISTA members and Foster Grandparents.
- ❑ Roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined by both well written job descriptions and orientation for all staff.
- ❑ The AmeriCorps*VISTA leader and one of his/her team must participate in planning meetings.
- ❑ The administration must show its support of this initiative by providing training, adequate space, transportation, and security.
- ❑ The AmeriCorps*VISTA members and Foster Grandparents must support the administration's efforts on behalf of the young transgressors.
- ❑ The AmeriCorps*VISTA members should be allowed to work with the social services department, so that they can reach the youths families, particularly during the last months of confinement.

VIII. ALLIANCE BUILDING:

It is of the utmost importance for Corporation for National Service programs and the volunteer cadre to identify and contact institutions and organizations that share their interests and goals.

Here in Puerto Rico, some of our best established alliances are:

1. Fondos Unidos (United Way)
San Juan, PR
(Offers orientation, financial support for training and part-time service by their volunteers)
2. Southwest Key Program
Ponce, PR
(Trains Foster Grandparents and AC*VISTA members who work with incarcerated youth)
3. Pontifical Catholic University of Puerto Rico
Ponce, PR
(Opens university facilities to AC*VISTA members and offers them some short courses for free)

4. Confraternidad Carcelaria Internacional

Capítulo de Puerto Rico
San Juan, PR
(Works alongside Foster Grandparents and AmeriCorps*VISTA members in juvenile correctional facilities)

5. Cuerpo de Voluntarios al Servicio de Puerto Rico
Departamento del Trabajo y de Recursos Humanos
Puerta de Tierra, San Juan, PR
(Trains incarcerated youth after they leave the correctional facility)

An example of a good working alliance is the juvenile correctional facility in Indianapolis where students of criminal justice spend at least one day each week training confined boys in a number of areas, including life skills. Many of the students return to work with the teenagers, some as long as three years after completing the course. This service-learning course was developed by a professor at Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI).

IX. HOW CAN FOSTER GRANDPARENTS CONTRIBUTE

According to questionnaires filled out by Foster Grandparents themselves, let us look at their accomplishments, the changes they perceive in themselves due to their service, and obstacles they might face.

A. What do Foster Grandparents accomplish?

- Many students pass their equivalency tests, and even the College Board.
- Improved reading and writing skills.
- A improved attitude and respect for their school work.
- To see them acquire mathematical skills and knowledge.
- Love and appreciation offered by the youth
- Those who keep in touch after leaving the institution.
- The acceptance of Foster Grandparent's presence and of the help he/she offers them.

B. How does working within this program affect Foster Grandparents?

- I feel useful.
- I am more compassionate.
- I am a better person because of their trust, love and respect.
- I feel happy because I am helping them become better persons.
- I am more patient.
- I am more tolerant.
- I have learned about the problems youth face.
- I am not alone or lonely anymore.
- I have improved my self-esteem.
- I am more relaxed.

3. What are the obstacles Foster Grandparents might face?

- Lack of a safe working space.
- Lack of equipment and materials.
- Not enough time to reach all.
- Lack of respect for the youth.
- Violence among confined youth.
- Isolation.
- Teachers who do not teach.
- Poor recreation for the juveniles.
- Lack of attention from some of the students.
- Lack of attendants assigned to special music and arts classes.

X. TRAINING MODULE FOR FOSTER GRANDPARENTS

By its very nature, the work done by volunteers at correctional institutions is draining, difficult and full of unexpected situations that can cause anxiety and outright fear. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that they be as prepared as possible before they assume their positions in these institutions.

I suggest that, besides the Pre-Service Orientation and Early Service Training offered to all AmeriCorps*VISTA members and Foster Grandparents, they attend forty hours of interactive workshops that should include, among other subjects:

- Youth rehabilitation as the goal of correctional institutions.
- Federal guidelines on working with youth in correctional institutions.
- Basic introduction to alcoholism, drug addiction and mental health issues.
- Conflict resolution.
- Crisis intervention.
- Security precautions.
- Prevention of contagious diseases.
- How can volunteers structure their time more effectively.
- How to measure their accomplishments.
- How to deal with obstacles.

XI. CONCLUSION

Volunteers work at five correctional facilities in Puerto Rico. Each AmeriCorps*VISTA member is assigned a group of ten to twelve inmates with whom they work directly. They also coordinate various services in the juvenile institutions as well as group visits outside the prisons (beach, concerts, library). The Foster Grandparents serve as mentors to the confined youth, mostly establishing one-to-one relationships with them, tutoring them in several subjects, and offering them classes on handicrafts.

Because the majority of these youngsters lack a close family or one-to-one relationship, this can be critical factors in their growth and development. Thus, Foster Grandparents:

- Promote the development of personal and social skills.
- Tutor the youth to help them finish their 7th grade education, pass their high school equivalency test, and/or gain sufficient vocational skills to get a job when they are released.
- Teach arts and crafts, needle craft, sewing and embroidery which are in high demand, particularly among the girls.
- Serve in medical clinics on the campus, helping doctors, nurses (RN), and licensed practitioner nurses (LPN), or as medical records clerks.
- Improve the lives of the confined youth, their families and their communities.
- Improve their own lives by feeling needed and fulfilled.

XII. SUGGESTED READINGS ON THE PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF JUVENILE TRANSGRESSION

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