

## Why Evaluate Roca's Intervention Model

So, why is the *Crime and Justice Institute* interested in partnering with a community-based youth development organization to evaluate its interventions with high risk young adults? In some respects, the answer is simple. As much as the research in the field of criminal justice has advanced in the last 30 years, the system remains ineffective. Our incarcerated and supervised populations have grown exponentially and nearly seven of every ten people released from correctional facilities are re-arrested and half are sent back to prison for a new sentence or for a technical violation within three years time (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002). Relative to the amount of money invested into the criminal justice system, few can argue that it is one of the greatest failures of our time. There have to be innovative interventions and we must test their application in real world settings.

Roca has been honing its intervention model to address the very population of young adults who fill, or are on a path to fill, our jails and prisons in hopes of intervening to change the trajectory of their lives. At the heart of Roca's approach is the belief that those individuals who are involved in criminal justice and facing potential dependence on other public systems are more than their history and more than their presenting behaviors. To some, this idea is the basis of our "rehabilitative" approach to corrections. Unfortunately, our practices are not always grounded in what works in rehabilitation. To those advocates of deterrence or retributive ideologies, this belief in the ability of people to truly change may sound out of place in criminal justice work, but it really is not. Research has demonstrated that individuals can change their behaviors when involved in appropriate interventions in which the individual's multiple needs are met, where barriers to participation are addressed and where the programs are delivered as they were intended using a core set of proven practices.<sup>1</sup> The problem is that this research is not commonly translated into practice and implemented in traditional correctional settings, even those based in the community. Roca has been developing its community-based, holistic response to at risk young people for years and is now ready to subject this response to rigorous evaluation in two geographic areas. Why would we and the field not be interested in the potential to discover a different way of addressing the issues of and brought on by disengaged, undereducated, unemployed, criminally- and other systems-involved young adults?

### **Statement of the Problem**

We have 7.2 million people in the United States under correctional supervision (supervised on probation or parole or incarcerated in our state or federal prisons, or in local jails), up from just over 4 million in 1990 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009). Of those over 7 million individuals, 5 million are under supervision in our communities and 2 million are incarcerated. The decision to remove this large number of people from society has implications at the macro level, such as costs and labor market productivity, and also at the micro or individual level. In 2010, Pew Center on the States issued a report entitled *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's effect on economic mobility*, within which it found that "former inmates work fewer weeks each year, earn less money and have limited upward mobility. These costs are borne by offenders' families and communities, and they reverberate across generations" (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> A summary of this research is provided in a separate document, *An Overview of What Works in Correctional Interventions*.

States spent \$49 billion on corrections in 2009, up 300 percent in the last 20 years. To put this in perspective, 1 in every 15 state general fund dollars was spent on corrections in 2007. Twenty-eight states spend 50 cents or more for corrections for every dollar spent on education (and five of those states spend more on corrections than education) (The Pew Center on the States, 2008). States and local jurisdictions are at a crossroads as they can no longer afford to support the policy decisions that resulted in mass incarceration and there is a sense among informed policy makers that the tremendous financial investment in corrections is not yielding corresponding benefits.

Pew's 2010 report on the collateral consequences of incarceration included staggering findings and statistics. Among the findings are the following:

- Incarceration is concentrated among men, the young, the uneducated and racial and ethnic minorities – especially African Americans. As an example, there are more young, African American men without a diploma or GED incarcerated than there are not incarcerated and employed.
- Incarceration negatively affects former inmates' economic prospects in that it reduces future hourly wages and annual earnings.
- The impacts of incarceration extend to former inmates' children and families. One in every 28 children in the United States has a parent incarcerated; this figure is one in nine for African American children. Children with an incarcerated parent are more likely to be expelled or suspended from school and families' incomes decrease during incarceration and continue to be lower following release than prior to incarceration. Both of these factors, education and family income, affects a child's future economic mobility (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010).

This is the economic future for the population Roca targets. As an example, the organization recently replicated its intervention model in Springfield, MA. Half of the participants served in this Western Massachusetts city are African American and another 42 percent are Hispanic. All are males between the ages of 17 and 25. Nine out of ten are high school dropouts and are gang- and/or street-involved and nearly all have at least one felony conviction. Eight in ten never made it past the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and just over half have children<sup>2</sup>.

### ***Roca's Response and Why it is Promising***

Roca is an organization that chooses to focus its efforts on this population of young people whose overall prospects, without effective intervention, are bleak given the current landscape. There is a lack of attention paid to them, a lack of programs tailored to engage and retain them, and a lack of public and political will to invest in them. Rather than accept this and work with a potentially lower risk group, Roca has invested years and significant human and fiscal resources in those most in need. The model is fairly well known among those interested in high risk young people as Roca is contacted by organizations all over this country and internationally. The core components of it are: relentless outreach; intensive case management (or what Roca calls "transformational relationships"); stage-based programming (or programming to accommodate various levels of motivation and readiness for participation); and working with engaged institutional partners.

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<sup>2</sup> These data were drawn from Roca's Efforts to Outcomes database and analyzed by CJJ in December 2010.

The Crime and Justice Institute believes that Roca's approach holds great promise. First, Roca seeks to address what are known in the field of criminal justice as criminogenic needs, or those risk factors that can lead to crime-producing behaviors. Specifically, Roca seeks to impact peer relationships, antisocial behaviors, educational engagement and attainment, and employment retention. Each of these is tied in the research to criminal behavior. Also, there is research that confirms that interventions that address multiple need areas are more effective than those that focus on a single area. Roca is holistic in that it works with young people on each area of need that could prevent them from ultimately leading economically productive and safe lives.

Second, one of the principles of effective correctional interventions is something called "responsivity". Essentially this means that in order for individual to participate in and complete interventions corrections professionals must remove barriers to participation. Responsivity is at the heart of Roca's work. The staff will do anything to meet with and engage young people in programming; in fact, Roca has to do this since participation with Roca is never mandated.

Third, the criminal justice system has historically operated on the basis of retribution and deterrence, but the correctional research has, in the last few years, begun to explore the importance of "relationships" with clients. While this is new to corrections, Roca has recognized the importance of relationships to behavior change for 23 years.

Next, criminal justice relies heavily on standardized measures to document success. For example, many correctional agencies define success in a program as the client attending each session of an intervention. For Roca, sustained behavior change represents the only acceptable success and it recognizes that this is not always demonstrated in a set number of sessions. Roca commits to young people for three years of intensive work and a 2-year follow up period. In this way, the organization, through its own assessment of progress, can track sustainable change. Length of time in interventions and programming is an interesting consideration. Take for example the practice in many correctional facilities of providing reentry programming to offenders in the six months prior to release. After sometimes years in an environment of antisocial modeling and association with antisocial peers, for example, is it reasonable to assume they would undergo sustainable behavior change within six months and is it any surprise that half are returned to prison within three years?

Much of Roca's work is focused on getting young people invested in the institutions and societal arrangements that keep people out of poverty and violence, such as schools and employment. Many of Roca's participants have been unable to access these institutions or have been denied access, so Roca attends to building relationships with institutions, agencies and organizations so that they have access. At the same time the organization is readying the institution to provide access, it is preparing the participant for how to retain access once gained. For example, Roca provides its participants with opportunities to "practice" employment through its transitional employment program. At a time when correctional agencies are reducing expenditures on inmate programming and struggling to attract them to it, Roca has expended its employment programming. The literature shows that this is a worthy investment as job training services for offenders in the community yields "\$4,359 per offender, the equivalent of \$11.90 per dollar invested" (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010).

Many correctional interventions are designed to dismiss a client from the intervention or, for example if they are under community supervision, to violate and return them to incarceration when they display the behaviors that led to their involvement in the criminal justice system. This flies in the

face of common sense as behaviors do not change quickly. Roca sees relapses in behavior as opportunities or teaching moments. Criminal justice researchers have only recently placed greater emphasis on relapse and relapse prevention.

Lastly, there is evidence that interventions with offender populations can work in community settings. If these interventions follow a core set of practices implemented with fidelity, there will be impact. Roca implements some of these practices and is invested in learning and implementing more of them.

Many of the characteristics and approaches built into Roca's model are common sense, but common sense is not enough. We need to ensure that they work. For this reason, Roca is committing significant resources to a full evaluation of its model in Chelsea and Springfield, MA.

Evaluating a community-based, holistic intervention model is not an easy task. Over and over, criminal justice researchers have studied specific, mandated correctional treatment programs or custodial or community supervision arrangements. Roca is none of these. Still, the fact is that the vast majority of correctional programs have yet to implement "effective" practices with fidelity and thus one may question the significance of the research. To evaluate Roca's model and its application in a real world setting is equally if not more valuable.

There are limitations to evaluating Roca's high risk intervention model. However, these limitations are similar to those experienced in most program evaluation research. Further, these limitations vary across the sites because of Chelsea being the initial Roca site and Springfield being the first replication. While the limitations pose challenges for conducting an implementation and impact evaluation, recognition for these limitations is necessary so that the findings will be placed in the proper context and will not be over-generalized. The limitations include the following:

- Roca's model has transformed over time. As such, the Chelsea site has gone through several changes to the model. However, it should be noted that with the recent replication at Roca Springfield, the implementation of the model is not being altered. When a model varies during the pilot or during the time of evaluation it becomes difficult to determine what about the model made the program effective or ineffective. Documentation of practice changes through implementation evaluation allows evaluators to place the overall study results in context.
- The eligibility criteria for participation at Roca Chelsea have not always been consistently adhered to. Again, this is expected in most programs to allow staff some level of professional override. However, the Springfield site has been able to consistently follow the eligibility criteria since its beginning.
- Roca does not administer a standardized risk tool to determine the risk for recidivism for their participants. As such, controlling for risk and matching comparison group members for the Chelsea site will need to be adequately addressed. This can be achieved by ensuring that the treatment and control groups are matched on as many variables as possible.
- The length of the proposed evaluations (3 years) poses a challenge in terms of retaining study participants, particularly those in the Chelsea comparison group and Springfield control group. To ensure an adequate level of retention, there will be regular communication with study

participants in between the data collection points. Incentives are also in place to encourage continued participation.

- The holistic nature of Roca’s model means that there are many variables for which we cannot control. The planned evaluations test the impact of the model at the individual level, not at the program level. Evaluations at the program level largely necessitate that participants receive the same type and same amount of intervention. Roca’s intervention is purposely designed to be individualized. To capture information about the program level, CJJ is conducting an implementation evaluation and also plans administer the CPAI-2000 prior to baseline interviews in year 1 and again before the final interviews in year 3. Recognizing that Roca is moving toward implementing the principles of effective intervention throughout its model, it will be important to recognize and objectively evaluate this change over time.<sup>3</sup> This will not tell us what factors specifically made a difference, however, we would possibly be able to state (if the data ends up demonstrating this) that improvements in adherence to the principles of effective intervention, did explain some of the differences in why the treatment group experienced better outcomes.

It is likely that there will be further limitations identified as the evaluations proceed. All of these will be clearly described in any evaluation reports discussing findings and recommendations. The best way to mitigate limitations is to implement the most rigorous evaluation design possible given those anticipated limitations. For Roca-Springfield, a three-year longitudinal, randomized field experimental design will be employed, using propensity scoring to reduce or reduce potential bias. In Chelsea, a quasi-experimental, longitudinal design will be implemented, using a difference-in-differences analysis to determine the impact of Roca. The evaluation team is confident that these are the strongest designs possible and in the context of evaluations of community based interventions are extremely rigorous.

CJJ and its research partner, Abt Associates, recognize that there are challenges and limitations to the planned evaluations in Chelsea and Springfield, Massachusetts, but being subjected to or having to defend against criticisms from the research community are worth the effort if, in fact, there is something to Roca’s model – which we believe there is. Again, our criminal justice system is not working, so we need to invest in studying alternative approaches, even when it is difficult.

If Roca’s intervention model, in whole or in part, proves to be effective, it will have significant implications for the field of criminal justice. It has the potential to change the way in which we interact with and relate to offenders, to change the structure of interventions to match client readiness for them, to expand our measures and more clearly define dosage and intensity of programming, and to challenge the perception of the criminal justice system on how to best address relapse behaviors. Will such behaviors be viewed as an opportunity for behavioral change or a reason for program dismissal and potential incarceration? It is recognized that public safety is paramount. However, the research has repeatedly demonstrated that incarceration for all offenders has actually increased recidivism rates, especially among lower risk offenders. Moreover, incarceration has been a costly solution to the crime

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<sup>3</sup> The CPAI-2000 and the principles of effective intervention are discussed in a separate document entitled *An Overview of What Works in Correctional Interventions*.

problem, with little substantial gain. Evidence-based interventions should be grounded in the research, be data directed, and should be as transparent as possible in terms of evaluation.

The number of offenders released into our communities, the number under some form of community supervision, and recidivism rates speak to the importance of community-based interventions and programs. Each year, more than 700,000 sentenced offenders released from correctional facilities (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010) and, in total, we have 5 million offenders under community supervision (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009). Half will be re-incarcerated within three years. As has been discussed, under current conditions, these individuals are not likely to lead productive lives and contribute positively to their communities. With Roca incorporating practices that the research has identified as effective with this population and with its interest in providing an alternative to working with offenders in the community, the case is made for rigorous evaluation Roca's intervention model.

*This document was written in January 2011 by Barbara A. Pierce, MPPM, with contributions from Kristin Bechtel, PhD candidate, on behalf of the Crime and Justice Institute at Community Resources for Justice.*