

## Lessons learned, and the importance of second chances

Young people who become involved in the criminal justice system often have acted on impulse, a characteristic of the still-developing adolescent brain. Their involvement in the criminal justice system can lead to disastrous results that follow them for the rest of their lives, making it hard to land a job, continue their education, and become self-sustaining members of the community. And without additional supports, they are likely to reoffend.

In 2016, the Foundation began its efforts to support these young people. We supported the Westchester Children's Association as it led the county's youth advocacy efforts in the statewide Raise the Age campaign, which raised the age of criminal responsibility to 18. And since then, the Foundation has supported a continuum of services for young people at risk of incarceration or already in the justice system. The prevention programs work within the court system to offer justice-involved young people the chance to get mental health and substance use services, educational interventions, housing, and job training instead of going to prison or detention. Programs for young people who have been released help them identify goals and plan for a future that includes education and/or entry into the workforce.

"The Foundation's investments aim to reduce incarceration and recidivism rates among young people and build the case for reform," notes Program Officer Robin Melén, who oversees the Foundation's youth development programs.

At CLUSTER, practitioners are trained in mediation to help young people take responsibility for their actions, as well as repair and prevent harmful behavior. A meditation and mindfulness training program provided by Finding Peace Within is introducing young people at the Westchester County Jail to use these tools and techniques.



At a recent meeting of the Foundation's Board of Advisors, a graduate of the Opportunity Youth Part program in the City of New Rochelle described how he made use of its opportunities. "I've learned the importance of second chances," he said.

For those who have been released, 914United offers peer mentoring, education and case management as well as job training, and Westhab helps young people clear their records and attend workshops that address their rights in the workplace.

Court-based programs are preventing young people from entering jail and helping them pursue better opportunities. These programs are proving to be promising models that incorporate mentoring, mental and behavioral supports, and wraparound services. In New Rochelle, grants to the Center for Court Innovation have helped launch the new Opportunity Youth Part, and in Mount Vernon, funding is supporting the Emerging Adult Justice Initiative led by the Youth Shelter Program of Westchester.