

Willem C. Kiefer (Bench Mark Program) Full Written Testimony

Good afternoon Congressional Committee Members,

I will not be the most experienced witness you will hear from today. I will also not be the most credentialed witness you will hear from today. But I will be the sole witness who has spent the last 10 years of my professional career, in truth the only 10 years of my professional career, building a system of programs that allow me to stick with at-risk youth through the toughest years of their lives. My name is Will Kiefer and I am the Executive Director and Founder of Bench Mark Program. While I share no common history with the youth that I serve, I have constructed a space that juvenile offenders, foster youth, and youth who have dual involvement in both delinquency and dependency, can call home.

Bench Mark Program is a gym. Think graffiti, loud music, barbells, and punching bags. But we are also a women's strength and fitness center, a lounge, an academic center, a kitchen, and a career development provider. On any given day we operate seven separate yet interconnected initiatives. We start with a mentoring program inside our local Youth Intervention Center, which is our juvenile detention center that contains a wing for youth in foster care without a permanent place to live. Upon their release from this secure facility, especially for our students with firearm-related criminal charges, we provide a 1:1 mentoring service to get youth through the period of time when they are most likely to reoffend. This can last between 3-6 months. We then shepherd these same youth into a 6-month small group mentoring program to teach them life skills, help them polish their resume, find a job, get on track in school, and get off probation (if they are delinquent). After that program, we welcome youth into our Open Gym Program, a community fitness-based mentoring program that operates daily and has no "end date" or "graduation." Within that program, youth can workout with mentors, lift weights, box, and also get help from a tutor with their homework, or work on their resume for their job hunt. For those youth who succeed in all of those programs, we offer them part-time employment through our Student Leadership Program, an initiative that prepares youth for a regular full-time job by teaching them "the basics" of work. They learn how to dress, how to use a time clock, how to deal with performance feedback, and how to handle a disagreement with a coworker. Interestingly, the Student Leadership Program mentors are local business executives who give their time on a weekly basis to pour leadership skills into this underserved group. Student Leaders can work for us for up to a year before we help them secure a higher paying job elsewhere, and even when that occurs, we still expect to see them at our Open Gym program on a weekly basis when they are off work. Of course for youth who are not involved in the delinquency system at all, we also operate a Suspension Alternative Program in our local high school, providing an alternative to out-of-school suspension that keeps our at-risk youth in the building, connecting with our Bench Mark Program mentors and getting them back on track.

The focus is not on these initiatives in and of themselves, but rather on the fact that each of these initiatives connects to the next, resulting in an average student engagement with a Bench Mark mentor of 38-months. Most importantly, it is the access to the SAME mentor program after program that keeps our students engaged. We are there, repeatedly, in the background of our students' lives.

In 2023, 92% of our delinquent students did not reoffend while engaged in our program. 83% resolved their truancy issues. 52% secured gainful employment after just our small mentoring program, but for those student leaders who worked for us, 77% secured gainful

full-time employment. These are just a few indicators that we are on the right track. Now it's time that I introduce you to some of the individuals behind these numbers:

I'll tell you first about Julius who is 18 years old, and for all but 3 of those 18 years has lived in foster care. He cannot remember what led to his entry into foster care, but he harbors no ill feelings towards his parents. They stay in touch, and even today, he dreams of going to live with them in South Carolina. He has moved in and out of many foster homes, but when I first met him, he was confined to our Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center (a juvenile detention center with a wing for youth without a home). Julius landed there after being removed from a foster home, moving into a group home, falling in with the wrong crowd, and ultimately committing a firearm-related crime. He called his mom right after committing the crime, and turned himself in hours later. He was 16 years old, had no prospect of being accepted into another foster home, and no idea how to navigate both the Children and Youth AND Juvenile Justice System within which he now found himself. **He had a lot of people telling him what to do, but very few people to help him do any of it.** Because of his gun charge, we enrolled him in our 1:1 gun violence prevention mentoring program which enabled his daily release from the detention center under our supervision. Once he completed that program, we enrolled him in a small group mentoring program designed to teach life skills and help kids complete their probation requirements. Once he completed that program, we engaged him in our community based fitness program, allowing him to keep in touch with his same mentors and peers. His success in that program led us to enroll Julius in our Student Leadership Program, where we gave him a part time job at our organization and helped him build his resume. He walked step by step through 5 different initiatives at our organization without a break in services. We testified on his behalf in his decertification court case (moving his charges from adult to juvenile court). He got his high school diploma. To date we have worked with him for more than 2 years, and now that he is living in a group home and looking for his first full-time job, we continue to work with him. He gets the undivided attention of his mentor, Anna. She is his navigator and she will stay involved with Julius until he tells her that he no longer needs her support.

Next I'll tell you about Shylah who is about to turn 18 years old while out "on the run." Shylah's Mom gave up custody of her daughter when Shylah was just 12 years old so that her mother could move in with an older man who wanted nothing to do with Shylah. Shylah was taken into foster care and became violent when confronted by anyone whom she believed had wronged her (over the littlest things). She couldn't last in any of the more than 10 foster and group homes where she landed. Every time she returned to the Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center, we engaged her in our programs. With the exception of the gun-violence prevention program, she went through all the same programs as Julius, in fact they know each other well. We became the only consistent "home base" in her life. Her release to our facility and our programs was one of few opportunities that she had to combat institutionalization. And despite our best efforts, even though she called us weekly from each placement and foster home she attended, she couldn't keep herself from getting into fights, some which resulted in criminal charges. After serving as a keynote speaker in front of 600 juvenile justice practitioners at the PA State Juvenile Court Judges Commission Conference this past November, Shylah ran off from our facility one evening with nothing more than the clothes on her back. She had purchased a phone, reconnected with negative peers from her past, and ran away to live with them until she aged out of foster care – instead of going to the group home that was set up for

her. The upcoming change and all of the good things happening to her were too much. She didn't want to wait "three more months for another group home." She fell back to the comfort of old, toxic peers instead of the challenge of life as a young adult in a group home. The only good news is that despite running away and aging out of foster care without any support, she called me last Wednesday night as I was writing this testimony and asked if she could come back to Bench Mark. She apologized to me, said that she was wrong to run away, and asked when I would be in the gym to meet with her and make new plans for her future. We picked a date, and I promptly edited this section of the testimony to reflect this new twist in her story.

Finally, sitting behind me today is Kenneth Jackson-Kiefer, my son. I am taking him back to Washington College for the second semester of his freshman year of college right after this hearing. My wife Karla and I fostered and ultimately adopted Kenny at age 16, helping to prevent him from aging out of foster care himself. When we met him, he too was dual involved in the delinquency and dependency systems. Today, he is a shining example of someone who has taken advantage of every opportunity available to him (at Bench Mark Program and beyond) and I will let him answer any questions you may have for him once I wrap this up.


In conclusion, here is what I would ask this committee to remember:

1. No one is ready to be "an adult" at age 18 when they are told they are an adult and told to prepare to live on their own. Freedom is not what any of us need at that age, no matter what incentives and resources are promised. At 18 they are still kids, in a complex and limited stage of brain development, especially those who have experienced the trauma of growing up in the foster care system for the majority of their childhood.
2. We cannot rely on the foster care system to help kids like Julius, Shylah, and Kenny when they age out. While many resources are available through the foster care system, the resources are largely inaccessible to the youth who need them. It takes an individual with incredible persistence and "system know-how" to access those resources. This is what my wife and I did for Kenny. This is what Bench Mark mentors do for their kids. We are their navigators. We know the ropes, we learned the system, and we lead them through the tangle of paperwork and processes to get them what they need. The solution lies not in changing the system, but in hiring and preparing more navigators to get youth through (and well beyond) the system.
3. Any program, system, or solution that we build or fund to serve youth needs to be intentionally designed to pair youth with a singular, long-term mentor, across many programs or in just one program. A consistent person that will be there for years at a time, accessible to the youth, until they decide that they no longer want the support. This is the gold standard, and the beauty is, it's something that we can make happen.

In this room today, we are gathered to discuss a complex, multifaceted problem involving some of the most traumatized, unpredictable, and challenging youth. We are well educated, well funded, and well connected. We will solve this problem. We will solve it as soon as we recognize that what made each of us successfully transition from young adulthood to adulthood is the same thing that youth aging out of foster care need. Namely, it is the presence of a consistent, reliable, available, long-term mentor who can be trusted to pick up when a kid calls, year after year after year until that kid finally gets across their chosen finish line. What is keeping us from building that type of support into our programs, our systems, and our society? Answer that question, and we will have solved this problem.

Exhibit A - Bench Mark Program 2023 Metrics, Internally Compiled

Exhibit B - Bench Mark Program Wrap Around Service Model w/ Program Descriptions

	Bench Mark Program 102 S Prince St Lancaster PA, 17603
2023 Compiled Statistics	Last Updated: 01/10/2024
Overall Outcomes	Data
Length of time that students across all programs stay engaged with Bench Mark via one in-person meeting at least once/month	38 months
Open Gym	
Average Nightly Attendance	68 students
Community Service Hours Completed	845
# of volunteer mentors (community members)	9
Retention (# of students who return at least once/month for 6 months)	73%
number of students who returned for services after being absent for 2+ years	14
Youth Intervention Center (YIC) Program	
Average Number of Students Served on a weekly basis	15
Percentage of students served (who are eligible for BMP services) are actually referred into a BMP services upon release	48%
Strenght-Based Skill Building (SBSB) Program	
Number of referrals	46
Number of referrals who completed the program	38
Percentage of students who did not reoffend while engaged in the program	92%
Percentage of students who resolved truancy issues	83%
Percentage of students who completed community service hours	98%
Percentage of students who secured or maintained employment while engaged in the program	52%
Percentage of students who have all passing grades	74%
Percentage of students who continue to engage with Bench Mark after program completion	66%
Predisposition Program	
Number of referrals	17
Percentage of students who did not reoffend while in the program	88%
Percentage of students who successfully complete Predisposition and migrate into SBSB	82%
Suspension Alternative Program (SAP)	
Number of Referrals	36
% of referrals who complete the entire 5-day program	94%
Percentage of students who do not committ another offense (warranting suspension)	69%
Percentage of students who get back on track in school (grades, attendance)?	86%
Student Leadership Program (SLP)	
Number of students employed	13
Average length of time of employment (months)	14
Percentage of employed students who secure gainful employment following their departure	77%

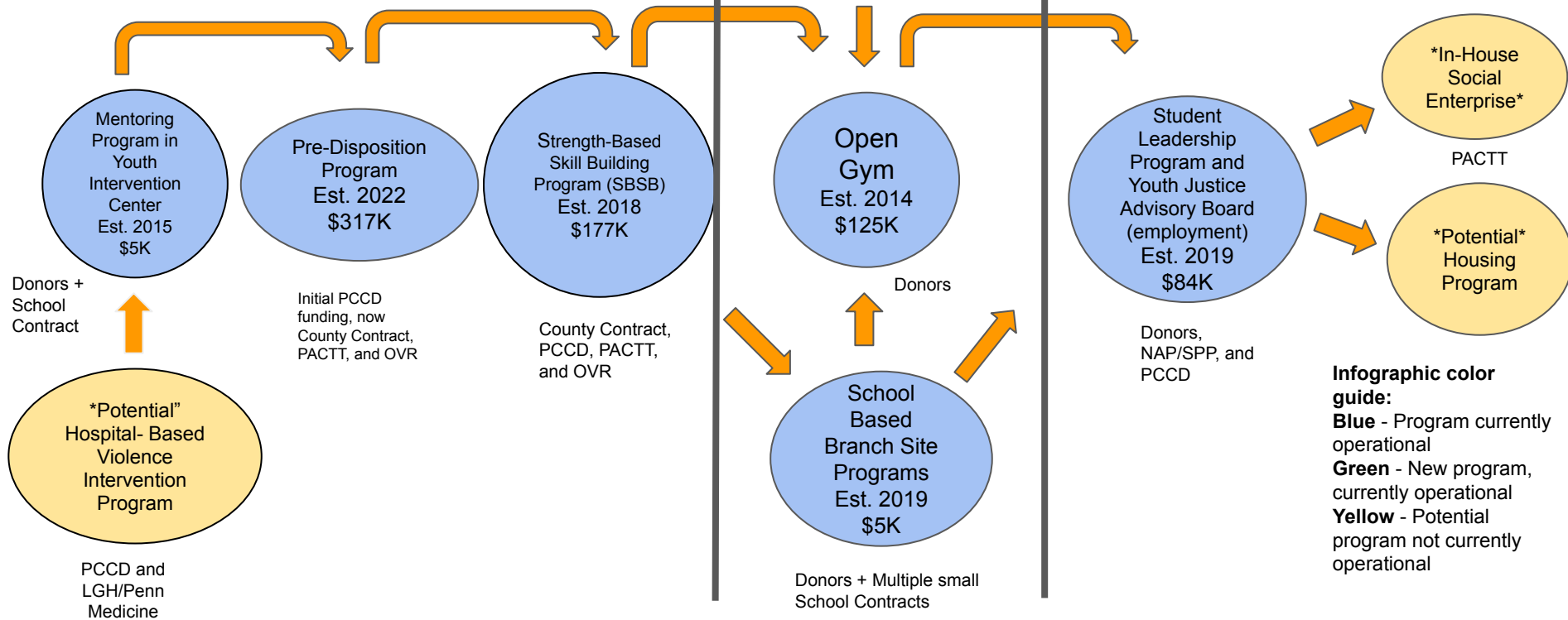


Wrap Around Service Model For Young Men and Women

Intervention

Prevention

Sustaining





Wrap Around Service Model Program Guide

Mentoring Program within the Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center (YIC) -

- Leadership program serving juveniles while they are confined to juvenile detention. Funding by School District of Lancaster

Predisposition Program (“Predispo”) -

- 1:1 mentoring program serving juveniles immediately upon their release from detention, continuously until their Disposition. Initial 2-year pilot funded through a PCCD Grant. Currently seeking ongoing support.

Strength-Based Skill Building (SBSB) Program -

- Evidenced Based Curriculum serving juveniles following their Disposition and throughout the remainder of their time on juvenile probation. Funding by Lancaster County Dept. of Juvenile Probation

Open Gym -

- Community, fitness-based mentoring program serving juveniles on juvenile probation and others referred by local School Districts, Children and Youth Agency, therapy offices, and families. Funded by donations

Student Leadership Program (SLP) and Youth Justice Advisory Board (YJAB) -

- Job training program to employ successful program graduates to assist with operation of the Open Gym. Funded by donations and NAP/SPP contributions

Suspension Alternative Program (SAP) -

- 5-day, evidence based curriculum that serves as an alternative to out-of-school suspension. Funded by the School District of Lancaster

School-Based Branch Site Program -

- After-school fitness-based mentoring program that includes leadership training. Funded by participating school districts.

In-House Social Enterprise - Screen-printing business that employs Bench Mark students. PACTT Alliance funded

Hospital-Based Violence Intervention and Prevention Program (HVIP) - Mentors meet with youth impacted by violent crime while they recover in the Trauma Unit of Lancaster General Health/Penn Medicine. Mentors provide case-management. Funding sought jointly through PCCD and LGH/Penn Medicine