

CPS to expand program that provides high-risk students with mentoring, counseling

Choose to Change, launched in 2015, has embraced 800 high-risk Chicago Public School students in an intensive program of mentoring, counseling, therapy, social services and more.

By [Laura Washington](#) Oct 25, 2021, 7:00am CDT

Chicago is trapped in a perfect storm of the pandemic, violence and fear. Our young people live in the eye of that hurricane.

Choose to Change, launched in 2015, has embraced 800 high-risk Chicago Public School students in an intensive program of mentoring, counseling, therapy, social services and more.

The need is urgent. Potentially, thousands of young people on Chicago's South and West sides are in trauma, said CPS Chief of Safety and Security Jadine Chou.

"We are amping up," she says. Today, CPS will announce the expansion of the program to additional community partners to reach out.

"Coming out of this pandemic and seeing again, not just that impacting our young people, but our entire city, seeing the impact of, you know, the trauma coming from being in isolation, the trauma coming from the impact of the increase in violence that we're seeing across many communities and really across the city," Chou told me last week.

Two nonprofits, Children's Home & Aid and Youth Advocate Programs Inc., have delivered a menu of wraparound services for teenagers who are on the edge of disconnecting from school or becoming victims of violence.

The University of Chicago Crime Lab and Education Lab rigorously evaluates their impact. In a randomized controlled trial, researchers found the program reduces violent-crime arrests by 50% and increases school attendance by about a week.

A year ago, high school senior Daryl's life was "overwhelming," he said.

“Just worrying about school and trying to put money in my pocket and trying to like, you know, just things like relationships with friends.”

Daryl (his surname is withheld to protect his privacy) was “frustrated and just angry and just not really focusing on what I should have been focused on,” he recalled when we met on Zoom.

Daryl chose change.

A small army of professionals convened to provide months of day-to-day mentoring, therapy, resources and cheerleading. And to tell students such as Daryl they are not alone.

When youth advocate Cassandra Bell first met Daryl, she remembers thinking, “Why is this king so sad? And why is he so down?”

They talked. Daryl needed “affirmation,” Bell said. “So, I just told him, ‘You’re beautiful. You’ve got to see yourself as the king. You have to see what you bring to the life.’”

Bell mentors 16 young people, tending to every need to keep them on track, with a laser focus on education.

Melanie, another mentee, was on the verge of dropping out, even though she was just a few credits away from graduation, Bell recalled.

Bell drove her to school every day. Melanie graduated, has a job and is planning for college, Bell said.

“So, our kids need people because people have given up hope on them. Sometimes their families have given up hope on them. Sometimes the people that matter the most to them have walked away from them and have given up, and they need to have advocates,” Bell said.

“For people who have been doing this work, it’s not new, but we know what works. We know that relationships work,” noted Chelsea Hopson, a youth therapist with Children’s Home and Aid.

“We need to hug them. It’s as simple as that. We really need to, like, wrap our hands around them because we care about them, and we need to show them that with their actions.”

It's expensive yet a small price to pay. This school year, the program will cost \$7.5 million, including about \$2.1 million for expanded services.

The effort is financed by a mix of public/private funds, with at least \$1.1 million from the city of Chicago. The sponsors are seeking \$4 million from philanthropy, with plans to eventually bring 500 more students into the program, Chou said.

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