

ASSET-BUILDING IDEAS FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE WORKERS

Juvenile justice workers know too well what happens when young people lack the developmental foundation they need. One who is an advocate for an approach to juvenile justice that focuses on rebuilding that foundation in the kids who need it most has said, "Asset building works for kids in the system." He believes that people who work with juvenile offenders need to ask themselves one key question: How do we rebuild assets in these kids who didn't get them along the way so they can come back and be productive members of society? Here are some ways to get started:

- **Focus on strengths.** In building case plans, assess the young people's and families' strengths as well as their needs. Everyone has some assets, but juvenile justice systems tend to focus on deficits instead. It is empowering to both youth and families to point out strengths and to identify concrete things that can be done to build on those strengths.
- **Relationships are key.** Programs and services by themselves don't change behaviors. Research shows—and good managers know—that kids need strong bonds with caring adults. As a reminder of this, post the list of developmental assets on your office door and do at least one asset-building thing for each youth or family you work with each day.
- **Be a team player.** No one person, program, or service is the answer. Parents, teachers, employers, mentors, religious youth workers, and others can and should help support the youth and families you deal with. Be a leader in bringing this support system together.
- **Share the asset message with colleagues** in law enforcement, probation, courts, and youth services. Demonstrate how assets provide concrete actions to counter "risk factors."
- **Explore how the asset framework may be used to support innovative approaches to juvenile justice** such as the balanced and restorative justice approach, community conferencing, victim-offender mediation, restitution, community service, mentoring, and other innovative approaches.
- **Encourage courts and juvenile services to provide free drop-in child care for the children of offenders** who are in court or receiving services.
- **Train community members in how to interact and build positive relationships in asset-building ways with youthful offenders** as well as other young people they deal with.
- **Working with others in the community, help offenders discover opportunities to experience success,** build their skills and competencies, and increase their confidence.
- **Work with others to identify, reduce, or eliminate factors in your community that put youth at risk for delinquency,** school dropout, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and violence.
- **Be an advocate for a healthy community**—a definable group, region, or network that organizes its systems and invests its resources to consistently promote developmental assets in all its young people. As a juvenile justice professional, you can credibly make the "pay now or pay more later" argument.