

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/breaking-point/a-holistic-approach-to-helping-young-people-achieve>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Every day at [Good Shepherd Services](#) (GSS), we see how precariously many of the city's most vulnerable and marginalized children and families balance the effects of toxic stress, complex trauma, mental illness and poverty. We know from our experience in our child welfare, juvenile justice, supportive housing, and domestic violence programs how easily crises can spiral into full-blown tragedies when youth and families don't have the resources, role models, or information they need to manage yet another trigger, hardship, or trauma.

We know that the solution is to intervene early and often to be a trusted, credible, and everyday presence in the lives of young people, their families, and their communities. In all of our school-based programs, we use an intentionally holistic approach that recognizes the dynamic interplay between life at home and in the streets, and performance in the classroom. At our Transfer Schools, Young Adult Borough Centers, and Community Schools all run in partnership with the Department of Education, what we call advocate counselors are assigned to students in need of additional guidance and support. Their role is multifaceted and dynamic, alternating between coach, mentor, tutor, counselor, and champion, depending on what young people need and where they need it in school or at home.

The experience of Trequan Bekka, now 27 years old and the associate director of GSS's Miccio Community Center in Red Hook, is emblematic. When he was struggling in high school with serious distractions from the street threatening to pull him off the graduation track for good, he turned to South Brooklyn Community High School (SBCHS), a GSS transfer school from which his mom had graduated. His family's connection to the school was significant to Tre. As a child, he had participated in our afterschool programs at the Red Hook Beacon Community Center at PS 15 and had gotten his first job there as a program aide. As a result, he knew and trusted us and our approach with young people. As he explains, All of Good Shepherd Services programs are strategically designed to build relationships and get personal with kids, to really get to know them and be supportive of them. At first you think, this feels like a cult. But then you realize that these people are really there to help you in a way that you are not used to.

Within two years of enrolling in SBCHS with only 12 out of the 40 credits he needed to graduate, Tre completed high school with a Regents diploma. Reflecting on his work now with middle school students from his neighborhood, he cuts to the heart of the matter: These kids are disabled because of traumatic events in their young lives that make it hard for them to get through school. I am working with a kid now whose mother died in front of him when he was in elementary school. That's why the counseling piece that Good Shepherd provides is so important. It helps kids move through the healing process.

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