

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/it-takes-a-village-blog-series/getting-the-word-out-about-diversion-programs>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Diversion strategies that prioritize community- and family-based solutions over punitive measures can help young people avoid becoming involved in the justice system. Veras recent [report](#) detailed the important work of many organizations from Nevada to Nebraska to Louisiana who provide diversion programs for youth and their families. But developing effective programs is only half the battle. The next obstacle is getting the word out to police and families that the programs exist.

Outreach can be a unique challenge for organizations like the Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC) in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana, a 24-hour drop-in center accessible to families, police officers, and youth intended to serve as an alternative to arrest and detention. The organization doesnt conduct much traditional advertising or publicity because its cost prohibitive. Instead, MARC relies on word of mouth and public relations tactics to get the word out.

Josh Campbell, MARCs manager, says he and his colleagues attend a wide variety of community events and meetings in order to reach their audiences. Churches, counseling providers, law enforcement officers, families, and other groups are all important parts of the outreach strategy and any event these groups hold is an opportunity to let them know about MARC and diversion. We want them to leave that meeting inspired to get the word out, he said. We know that there is a short period of time when youll be on someones mind, and its important to take advantage of that.

Additionally, MARCs employees attend police trainings and meetings with school administrators to ensure those who are most likely to need and use diversion strategies know how they can do so. The number of referrals to MARC coming through the school system has increased and an encouraging trend in local diversion, Campbell says.

We really want to connect with community members, whether it be a parent themselves or someone that works with other families in the community, he said, adding that once, he even spoke to a police officer in a mall as the officer was arresting a young person for shoplifting to let him know about MARCs services. We do basically anything we can to promote our program."

A representative in the field in Illinois (who asked not to be named for this blog) said his organization takes a similar tact, participating in community events, providing fliers to law enforcement and going to schools, community centers, and other local networking committees. The messaging, he said, has to be family-focused and therapeutic in nature in order to be effective. His organization doesnt conduct traditional advertising, either, mostly because the states budget is stymied, he said.

Campbell says using local news organizations both on television and in print can also be an effective marketing method. MARC recently started a monthly column in *The Voice*, a local alternative newspaper. Youre going to reach a few people each time that goes out, he said. The organization will talk with just about any reporter who is interested its just important to keep repeating the message. Any kind of media we can get is good for our community, he says.

The MARC provides services to youth through what it calls front-door and back-door referrals. Back-door referrals come when a young person is in police custody and has already been arrested; young people come to the center in handcuffs. Front-door referrals occur either before an arrest, or when law enforcement has already released the young person back to his or her family after charging them. When young people come in through the front door, they are unshackled.

Since it was founded in 2011, MARC has seen a 151 percent increase in front-door referrals and a 69 percent decrease in back-door referrals. Other walk-ins have increased by 57 percent. Its encouraging that the community is utilizing the MARC not [only] to keep a kid from penetrating further into the system, but to keep the kid from entering the system at all, Campbell said.

Although Campbell says that outreach is still a challenge, he says he knows his strategies are working when families come in after being referred by other families in the community. That means that community members who have interacted with MARC like the service so much they want to share it with others they care about.

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