

SONJA R. OKUN

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Matt Klein, Executive Director
Blue Ridge Foundation

Dear Mr. Klein:

I am submitting the following as an initial inquiry for the Blue Ridge Foundation to consider a full proposal for my proposed start up, Exalt.

Introduction

Exalt provides a comprehensive internship program linking education, meaningful employment and mentoring for New York City's most at risk adolescents. Premised on the belief that substantive, supported internships can be powerful catalysts and incentives for youth to pursue their education and employment goals, its mission is to equip youth along the spectrum of criminal justice involvement risk with the skills and experience necessary to take concrete steps towards becoming self-sufficient, self-fulfilled, productive members of society.

After almost a decade of managing the Career Exploration Project, an award-winning internship program for youth offenders I founded in 1997 at CASES¹, I believe it is time to apply my skills, experience and passion towards helping a larger percent of our disconnected youth forge positive futures.

The Need

"Upwards of 200,000 young adults in New York City are disconnected from the mainstream – not attending high school and ill-prepared for work or higher education."²

Exalt will play a unique role in the landscape of services available to adolescents from New York's under-resourced neighborhoods. At-risk youth who do seek employment programs are generally limited to two options: basic job readiness training programs that tend to offer rote curriculum content and which do not address youths' individual interests or career goals; or industry-specific vocational training programs that are more suited for adults who have identified a particular trade they want to pursue. Without meaningful work experiences, entry level jobs can even serve as disincentives for youth to pursue employment because they don't see these jobs as stepping stones the way more privileged youth do, but rather as dead end tracks that don't provide enough money to support them and their families, or utilize their talents and interests. Supported, individually tailored internships, therefore, can be critical in building youths' motivation to pursue education and employment.

Government and private funders have recently begun to demonstrate a new commitment to serving this population. While there may be a handful of organizations operating effective employment programming, many established agencies that excel in other areas at serving this population – in GED preparation, in mental health services, and even in traditional job development services - struggle in their attempts to create meaningful internship programs. Exalt builds on an established model and method for creating a substantive internship program that meets the needs of youth and employers.

How it Works and Who it Serves

Selected through a competitive process from partner schools, youth (ages 15-20) first participate in a 4 week class which builds employment and life skills. Participants then work in paid internships for 3

¹ Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services.

² "The Time is Now: Implementing One System for New York City's Emerging Work force", A Working Paper Developed by New York City's Young Adult Task Force, September 2005.

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months. Staff develop internships in a wide range of fields to match youths' interests, maturity levels, and experience. Employer supervisors act as mentors, providing further education and career guidance. During internships and for 6 months after, participants attend classes in which they process and evaluate their experiences, continue learning in topics such as financial literacy, and receive continued assistance in further job searches, educational plans and other areas of need. Exalt reaches out to all program alumni for years to offer ongoing support and track outcomes.

While Exalt will always strive to serve youth who have already become enmeshed in the justice system, it will also function to prevent criminal justice involvement. Target partners include: youth from the City's "worst" high schools, at risk of dropping out/being expelled; youth in GED programs that lack substantive employment programs; youth from the City's other alternative to incarceration programs; and youth exiting from detention/incarceration. In year one Exalt will establish a partnerships with 2-3 schools/programs to serve 90 youth. Partnerships and number of youth served will increase each year at a scale that does not compromise program integrity.

Leadership

I am well prepared to develop and manage Exalt as well as establish necessary linkages for the organization. After founding the Career Exploration Project at CASES and running it for several years I went on to earn an MBA at Harvard to develop my ability to manage, as well as better direct and increase resources to serve the most at-risk youth. After business school and a summer internship in the Robin Hood Foundation's Management Assistance department, I returned to CASES where for the past several years I have been managing all education and employment programs, including the Career Exploration Project, and a staff of over 20. The Career Exploration Project has won 3 national awards and tripled in size under my tenure. With funding I secured from the Robin Hood Foundation last year, the Career Exploration Project has reached capacity within CASES. Having heard for years from the youth we serve, "why do you have to get locked up to get this program?" I feel strongly that my next step should be to utilize my skills and experience to create and manage an organization that can act as prevention for criminal justice involvement as well as contribute to reversing the trend of a growing undereducated, unemployed generation of youth.

Conclusion

Exalt will provide youth with motivation to pursue education; and information, skills and experience that enable them to function in professional environments, develop career goals, and increase their employability. I will apply my extensive experience developing, implementing and adapting systems to track program outcomes³ towards measuring and demonstrating Exalt's success in order to grow and diversify support.

Exalt would blend well with the other organizations in Blue Ridge's portfolio. There are potential synergies between Exalt and IMentor, Groundwork and College Summit, for example. I look forward to the opportunity to work with the Blue Ridge team to build a strong organization that can be a leader in quality internship programming for New York City's neediest youth.

Sincerely,

Sonja Okun

³ For example, while 70% of New York City youth who are arrested and sent to jail will return within a year of their release, * only 5% of all 2003 CASES' Career Exploration Project graduates had recidivated as of early 2005. Of the 2003 program graduates we were able to follow as of spring 2005 (80%): 86% had continued to pursue education; 79% were working at the point of last contact. * (source: Correctional Association)