

### Citation

Monsma, S., & Smidt, C. (2009). An Evaluation of the Latino Coalition's Reclamando Nuestro Futuro (Reclaiming our Future) Program. Paul Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics, Calvin College.

### Highlights

- This report presents an implementation analysis of the Latino Coalition's Reclamando Nuestro Futuro (RNF) program. The program provided skills training, case management, and follow-up services to at risk youth and those with previous criminal justice experience between the ages of 14 and 21.
- The study examined RNF programs in 19 sites, focusing on program organization, sub-grantee characteristics, and participant characteristics and outcomes. The study utilized management information system (MIS) data, staff interviews, site visits, participant focus groups, and interviews with community partners.
- The program was successful in reaching and retaining minority youth and those with previous criminal justice experience, largely because program subgrantees were located in and matched the neighborhoods they served, and had staff members who seemed similar to, and accessible to, their target population.
- The Latino Coalition, the intermediary organization, played a critical role in the program's success by establishing a robust organizational and oversight structure and providing capacity-building assistance to the relatively new and small faith-based and community organizations delivering program services.

### Features of the RNF Program

The RNF program was a three-year program developed by the Latino Coalition and funded through a \$10 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor in 2004. The program served at-risk youth between the ages of 14 and 21, and sought to help increase their employment rates, job preparedness, and educational achievement, as well as to avoid recidivism. 80 percent of youth served were required to be Latino, and 60 percent were required to have previous experience with the criminal justice system.

The program was a multi-state intervention involving 28 subgrantees in six cities (Phoenix, AZ; Los Angeles and San Diego, CA; Denver, CO; and Dallas and Houston, TX). The subgrantees were typically relatively new, small faith-based and community organizations that were largely located in the areas they served. All subgrantees offered some participants soft skills training, case management, and follow-up services. The subgrantees had discretion over which of 10 other service options to provide: GED preparation, basic and remedial education, skills training, community service, internships, subsidized or unsubsidized work experience, job preparation, occupational training, mentoring, and substance-abuse services.

## Features of the Study

The study examined RNF program organization; subgrantee organization, implementation, outreach, services, and experiences; and participant characteristics and outcomes. It included 19 active sites that received Latino Coalition funding in the third year of the program in five cities: Phoenix, AZ; Los Angeles and San Diego, CA; Denver, CO; and Houston, TX.

Data sources included (1) MIS data on participant characteristics, service receipt, and outcomes; (2) interviews with central office staff; (3) site visits to all sites; (4) 19 participant focus groups in the 11 sites that were still receiving some Latino Coalition funding in early 2008; and (5) focus groups with community partners identified by community subgrantees.

## Findings

The program was implemented by subgrantees that were small, faith-based community organizations with very limited experience and capacity, especially for data collection and record keeping. The Latino Coalition—the intermediary grantee organization—provided critical input for program success to these subgrantees. It established a robust organizational and oversight structure and assisted subgrantees in capacity building by drawing on outside consultants and hiring city directors (one per site). City directors played a particularly important role, providing two-way channels of communication, acting as coaches and trainers, conducting quality control, and inculcating sustainability. Subgrantees perceived the city directors as knowledgeable, skillful, and very responsive to their requests for assistance. Subgrantees partnered primarily with probation departments and officers, schools, churches, and community service agencies—rather than with the workforce system—in recruiting participants and delivering services.

The program was successful in reaching and retaining minority youth and those with previous criminal justice experience, because program subgrantees were mostly located in, and matched, the neighborhoods they served, and had staff members with backgrounds similar to those of program participants. Staff befriended participants and made themselves accessible and available. In addition, programs that offered appealing skills training (such as computer graphic design, video/sound recording and editing) and integrative services—activities beyond the RNF program—had greater retention.

Overall, subgrantees appeared to have been effective at engaging participants, but had mixed success in implementing all the prescribed steps for following up with them. Staff were diligent about performing initial assessments and developing initial service plans, but found it difficult and sometimes unwise to follow the service plan developed at the outset. They also found it difficult to maintain monthly contact with participants, given the highly transient and mobile nature of the target population.

The descriptive analysis of participant outcomes revealed several positive trends. 28 percent of all program participants and 40 percent of out-of-school participants had positive employment, job training, or education outcomes. Participating youths had low recidivism rates—just 9 percent. The degree to

which participants engaged with the program also appeared to play an important role, as increased time spent in the RNF program was correlated with better outcomes. Participants of integrative programs had better outcomes than those of non-integrative programs. There did not appear to be a difference between the outcomes of participants of faith-based programs and those of community-based programs.

### **Considerations for Interpreting the Findings**

The study did not include a thorough description of data collection, data analysis, data quality control, and triangulation methods, or the degree to which its key findings were prevalent across study sites or study participants. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the findings based on site visits and interviews reflect the average program experience. In addition, study results should not be interpreted as generalizable to all participating sites; they might represent the views and experiences of more successful sites, since only those sites receiving a third year of grant funding were included in the study. In addition, program completers were disproportionately represented in the focus groups, relative to program noncompleters.