

Feature Story: My City: In Olneyville Connecting Kids to Jobs and Building the Future



Providence, over the past five years, is seeing a rise in new development across neighborhoods and downtown. And even better than nice, new buildings are solid, high-wage jobs. But it hasn't always been easy for a young Providence resident with a strong work ethic to connect to building trades. That is where Andrew Cortes and YouthBuild come in.

For at least 30 young adults every year, YouthBuild affords Providence young people the opportunity to access growing fields in construction through skill-based training and leadership development. In fact, since director Andrew Cortes took the reins five years ago, he has steered their efforts toward having each graduating class build a brand new low-income house for a family in Providence. To date, four new homes for working families in Olneyville have been built from the ground up by young people in our city ages 16 to 24.

To add to their success, this year YouthBuild and Cortes partnered with Mayor Cicilline and members of the building trades to launch a new initiative called Building Futures, which reaches out to disenfranchised adults in Providence and gets their feet in the door that could eventually lead to careers in construction as well.

Tell us about the mission of YouthBuild.

YouthBuild Providence is an alternative education workforce development program. It is a very intensive way to work with our most disenfranchised youth and put them on a better track to having a bright future. What we do is work with folks in an educational environment for one week and then in a construction environment the next week and we rotate that way.

With each class, we build a house every year for a low-income family. We always develop low-income housing. So it's a really good foundation for any career path you want to pursue. About a third of our graduating class tends to go to the construction trade. About a third ends up going to post-secondary education. And about a third pursues careers that are entirely different.

How does recruitment work? Is there an application process?

There is an application process. The program has become incredibly popular over the last several years. So, our recruitment efforts are fairly minimal and we end up with about 200 applicants for 30 slots. We are looking to expand that as we look to develop a new organizational home so we can take in more students. So the 30-limit class size is strictly a result of what we have the capacity to serve and the space we have, but there's certainly a lot of need for our program.

Can you elaborate a little bit more on the nature of the program that your students go through at YouthBuild?

The nice thing about YouthBuild is that it's a very comprehensive program model. So, yes there's hazards training and job skills training on the construction site, and there's academic work and GED preparation, but there's also a computer application class, a financial literacy class, leadership development you know, there's a variety of different learning components to make it a very well-balanced and deep intervention with our young adults.

It's an incredibly intensive program that requires a lot of commitment from our young adults ages 16 to 24. One of the features that make YouthBuild stand out from other programs is the leadership development component. We very firmly believe that leadership tied with service creates a dynamic where our young adults are not only engaged with society but are doing it in a positive way, which demonstrates their own abilities to create change. This is very important as we work with a lot of adjudicated youth, some who might have been through incarceration for one reason or another.

Why are apprenticeship and trade-oriented programs still important?

I do know that it is a very difficult world to survive in and too many youth fall through the cracks and often become disenfranchised. Sometimes it takes a more intensive engagement with our young adults in a way that often our society doesn't provide to them. There's a reason why people are turning to illegal activities to support their families and that speaks to the lack of opportunities.

Part of the reason why I enjoyed being a part of the Mayors Poverty, Work & Opportunities Task Force is the very fact that the Mayor also recognizes that there are individuals who need alternative pathways from being either a low-wage worker or a disenfranchised unemployed worker, into having genuine career paths that can support their families. Without those alternatives, people have to find the means to survive and so they turn to activities that may not be productive or beneficial to society.



In the five years that you have been at YouthBuild, how would you describe your success so far and what do you see as some of the challenges you still face?

I'm very happy to say that we had our best year ever last year. I would like to think that it's because of the ways in which we have developed the talent in our staff.

Last years' class, we dealt solely with young adults who have dropped out of high school and we had 92% retention. So whatever it is we are doing, its turning out good results. So there has been a lot of success we made the switch four years ago to the construction of new houses, which was a very positive switch for us.

Renovation work was not providing the same opportunity for skills learning that new construction does. New construction is something where you can map things out very well and you know what skill sets you are going to be teaching. And there is a joy in constructing a home from the ground up for a family in need where you can always drive by twenty years later and say, I built that house.

Recently, you, the Mayor, and some other members of the building trade in our city came together to launch the Building Futures Initiative. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Building Futures has two major facets. On the one hand, it's an initiative that is designed to change the way the construction industry does business in general, to make more explicit pathways for low-income adults to enter these careers. On the programmatic side we work flexibly with adults who are low-wage workers that are under- or unemployed.

We do intensive evaluation, and we help them get everything in order as well as prepare them to gain access to apprenticeship programs. The apprenticeship model is one that the unions have been vetting for well over a hundred years at this point. It's the traditional and extremely effective means of workforce development that we are currently underutilizing.

In Building Futures, there is no age limit and its very individualized process. We follow and support our constituents throughout the full length of their apprenticeship. Building Futures is really about building bridges and our participants are the most effective bridge that we can have. We work with people who have incredible quality and we want to see them develop their quality to the fullest extent to benefit themselves, their families, and the community at-large.

How can people access Building Futures, and has the program begun?

It has begun. We are in a pilot year currently, and in this year, we are committed to placing thirty adults into these career paths and we are well on our way. We are about halfway through in our placements. The first step to getting involved is through orientation. Its way for us to explain all the variety of career paths that is available in construction and also to see if the individual should submit an application.

Aside from acquiring marketable careers that could land them a job, or a career, what are your hopes for your constituents of both YouthBuild and Building Futures?

Well really this is about a new labor movement. We have a demographic in our city that is disenfranchised, that has very few opportunities and there is this incredible career path in front of them that is so underutilized. So there is an obvious connection to be made here.

What we are seeing here is a point in time where the current construction workforce is retiring and there is a vacuum in an industry that is growing, so where can that be filled? Why not take this opportunity to build the bridges, the connection, and the support needed to reach where unions, apprenticeship programs, and contractors have always wanted to go but where they haven't known how.

YouthBuild and Building Futures ends up being very much a place where you can tie all these pieces together. We are looking for a diverse workforce. We are looking for our participants to seize the opportunities that are available so they can better themselves and their families.