

FLY's Refinements Helped Jairo Soar



Jairo Bustos is an intelligent, confident young man, a goal-oriented student and a loving father. But when a series of bad decisions led him to California's Juvenile Hall, his future was in jeopardy.

Jairo traces his path into the justice system back to his years in middle school in San Jose, CA. His parents were both young when he was born, so his grandparents took responsibility for raising him. They became the only parents Jairo knew, so when they died when he was thirteen, it left him unmoored.

In a local gang he found the male role models he was seeking and a way to escape from bullying. At first he loved the lifestyle and the easy money that came with dealing drugs. He looked up to the gang leaders, who had both money and respect. He lost interest in school, skipping classes and flunking tests.

Jairo scored so well on standardized tests that he won the attention of his middle school principal in spite of his poor performance in class. The principal recommended him for a prestigious international baccalaureate high school program that offered a new environment and a chance for academic achievement, but Jairo turned it down.

"I know now that it would have been ideal for me, but I decided to go to the high school in the neighborhood where I had grown up, where my friends were going. It was so much easier to me to fall into a bad lifestyle," he said.

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The first time Jairo was arrested and sent to Juvenile Hall, during his freshman year in high school, the short stay was an ego boost. When he returned to high school, the other students looked up to him. But the second time the police arrested him, it felt different.

Jairo took stock of his situation and wondered how to turn things around. "I started thinking I don't want to do this. I wanted to change, but I didn't have the resources," he said.

A door opened when his probation officer referred Jairo to FLY—Fresh Lifelines for Youth—a California nonprofit that works to prevent juvenile crime and the incarceration of teens. FLY’s motto is, “All our children deserve a chance to become more than their past mistakes.”

When Jairo started at FLY, the organization was deep into a three-year process to strengthen its programs. FLY had been chosen to participate in PropelNext, a program of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation that helps promising nonprofits convert their passion for serving disadvantaged youth into data-driven insights and practices that increase their impact on young people’s lives.

PropelNext grantees collect data from their programs and use it to rethink and refine their program models. Through PropelNext, FLY developed a more strategic and intentional approach to its programs, ensuring that every single young person receives a consistent set of services. It spent months testing new approaches, evaluating their impact and revising the program model again and again.

“Our goal is to prevent recidivism. We’re laser-focused on that outcome,” says FLY founder and CEO Christa Gannon. In 2016, more than 80 percent of the youth served in its Law/Leadership program didn’t commit a new offense during the year. In contrast, without intervention, 50 to 80 percent of youth cycle back into the justice system after their release. The organization’s participation in the PropelNext program helped to galvanize its efforts to collect and track data on youth post-program participation. FLY is currently tackling this work and tracking these outcomes through private funding but is actively collaborating with local agencies to gain access to administrative data on recidivism and to share the results with staff and supporters.

Thanks to the advocacy work of FLY and other organizations working on juvenile justice issues, California has seen a 77 percent reduction in the number of kids incarcerated in Santa Clara County and a 65 percent reduction in San Mateo.

The entry point to FLY is its Law Program, a semester-long legal education and life skills course that teaches youth who are involved in or at risk of becoming involved in the

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FLY Motto



juvenile justice system about the law and the consequences of crime. The course covers topics including theft, vandalism, hate crimes, drugs, alcohol, and gangs. Participants learn about their legal rights and responsibilities; they also practice interacting respectfully with police to defuse conflict. Jairo took those lessons to heart.

Young people who successfully complete the Law Program are considered for the year-long intensive Leadership Program. PropelNext helped FLY staff members develop an objective set of criteria to identify appropriate candidates. They use a comprehensive, validated risk assessment tool to determine which youth face the greatest risk of re-arrest and demonstrate readiness for change. “Before, we picked kids to move on based on our instincts and intuition,” said Christa. “Now, we have a comprehensive assessment that helps us determine which clients are at the greatest need for our services.”

At first Jairo turned down the opportunity to participate in the Leadership Program. The three-day retreat at the start of the program would be the longest time he had ever been away from home. He was fearful of feeling homesick and intimidated by unfamiliar activities on the agenda, like ropes courses and zip lines. But a persuasive FLY case manager, Reyna Martinez, finally convinced him to give it a try, and Jairo underwent a life-changing experience. He participated in team-building exercises with rival gang members. The dreaded ropes course offered him an alternative way to prove himself.

And then there was the FLY staff. “Everyone was friendly and genuine. They really cared about me,” said Jairo. FLY staff have always had a remarkable ability to build rapport with youth. Through PropelNext, they learned to become more intentional in building on this rapport to use tested methods to guide youth to positive outcomes. The several research-based interventions that FLY uses include, for example, motivational interviewing, which strengthens young people’s motivation for, and commitment to, change.

Every youth in the Leadership Program is assigned a case manager who advocates for him or her with probation, courts and lawyers, and who works with their schools to help them get back on track to complete their degrees. Young people also participate in small- group coaching sessions where they learn to support one another and embrace change.

FLY case managers develop youth service plans for each young person. Reyna began with a 360-degree assessment, collecting information from Jairo, his school guidance counselor, his probation officer and his family. Reyna worked with him to remove the barriers and build the skills he needed to achieve his goals. They focused on decision-making, anger management and learning how to help one’s self instead of relying on others.

“Our work with PropelNext has been validating,” said Christa Gannon. “We were able to measure what we do well and give our staff the support they needed to use those best practices consistently with every single client.” FLY continues to monitor its data via

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Founder & Chief Executive Officer, FLY

weekly meetings. The data team measures impact and tweaks the program plan whenever necessary.

The new approach gave Reyna access to better tools with which to do her job. She relies on data to identify the best ways to help youth to focus on their education without turning them off, and she has learned new ways to guide conversations on difficult topics like mental health and anger management. She changed her schedule to meet with Jairo at the times when he could benefit the most. When he was busy trying to improve his grades, starting school at 7 am and practicing with his high school football team in the afternoons, she would arrive at 5:30 am to take him to breakfast and then drop him off at school. “Reyna really believed in me, and she was the one who suggested that I could go to college even though I had failed so many classes,” Jairo said.

FLY’s law program had sparked Jairo’s interest in the legal system. With Reyna’s support, he applied to four colleges and was accepted by three. He is now a sociology major at San Jose State, with his sights set on law school next. He is active in his fraternity and devoted to his young son, Ezekiel. He is also the president of a local youth advisory council, a partnership between FLY and the probation department. Through FLY he has built strong communications skills and begun developing an impressive résumé that will provide a foundation for his career.

The program model that undergirds FLY’s work is not visible to young clients like Jairo. Every activity is planned to achieve specific outcomes. Every intervention is monitored and fine-tuned. Every staff member has access to sophisticated tools that make it easier to guide sensitive conversations with young people. The FLY team has spent countless hours analyzing risk factors and their impact on young people. They meet weekly to review progress and make program changes in real time.

But Jairo doesn’t need data to understand its value. “My level of maturity has grown through FLY,” he says. “They taught me how to be a support system so now I know I’m going to be a good support system for my son.”

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