

CEO

CREDIBLE MESSENGERS IN RE-ENTRY SERVICES

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For more than thirty years, the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) has offered immediate, effective, and comprehensive employment services exclusively to individuals with criminal convictions. CEO's programs help participants gain the workplace skills and confidence needed for successful transitions to stable, productive lives. Through our proven model, CEO has made over 25,000 unsubsidized job placements with more than 4,000 employers throughout the country. CEO targets adults of all ages at the highest risk of recidivism and those confronting significant barriers to employment.

The organization's commitment to continuous evaluation is rooted in its 2004–2008 randomized control trial. The study found CEO to be effective in reducing recidivism, particularly for recently released individuals with the highest risk profiles, but no long-term effects were shown on employment. The findings satisfied an immediate need to confirm the core program model but, more significantly, marked an organizational shift from *pursuing proof* to *generating knowledge*. In addition to performing multiple replication studies, CEO initiated a series of projects and strategic hires to consistently test which specific program activities worked best for which profile of participant and what improvements could be scaled to have a more

sustaining impact overall on long-term economic mobility. Most recently, CEO has invested heavily in testing program innovations to abate the unique barriers faced by young adults, age eighteen to twenty-five, who comprise roughly 40 percent of our annual enrollments.

BECOMING CREDIBLE MESSENGERS

The Credible Messenger Initiative (CMI) was developed in 2017 for CEO's New York City office as part of broader efforts to improve services to young adults. Credible messengers are individuals with lived experience similar to the people they are seeking to serve. At CEO, this lived experience ranges from being justice-involved, growing up in similar neighborhoods, or being faced with situations similar to those our participants have faced. The CMI model is intended to supplement, not replace, the core program model, specifically the support provided by job coaches (JC) and job developers (JD). CMI was designed to serve participants age eighteen to twenty-five who are identified as struggling or likely struggling through standard CEO programming and need some extra support from staff and peers. Participants are typically referred by their JC but may be referred by other CMI participants or may independently request to join.

CMI was heavily influenced by the Arches Transformative Mentoring program (Arches), which was launched in 2012 and managed by the NYC Department of Probation. Like Arches, CMI combines a group mentoring model with individual case management, consisting of sixteen workshops designed to develop both professional and life skills in young adult. All workshops facilitated by credible messengers are structured as a talking circle and cover topics including networking, goal setting, and time management. These workshops are enhanced by one-to-one support that CEO credible messenger staff offer CEO participants to support their success. The experience and insights of the credible messenger staff were crucial in the implementation of CMI as well as each phase of its evaluation.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

The process and outcome evaluations were designed and executed by CEO's internal evaluation unit. In the project's initial months of CMI, process evaluation data were collected via weekly joint team meetings and a CMI staff focus group. Generally, staff reported strong commitment to the initiative,

especially the enhanced case management component. Staff believed the group mentoring sessions were meeting a previously unmet need for many of the “harder to reach” participants to discuss life experiences beyond direct barriers to employment. During planning for the pending outcome evaluation, the staff of CMI and the evaluation team most vigorously debated the possible negative impacts of CMI enrollment on transitional work attendance and how the increased flexibility of the recruitment and discipline standards affected CMI participants as compared to those of standard CEO program model enrollees. The largest hurdle was how the group differences (CMI participants versus other CEO young adults) would inhibit the construction of a valid comparison group.

With these concerns in mind, two key decisions were made prior to the outcome evaluation: 1) enrollment for the evaluation cohort began after an agreed upon maturation point at which the procedures and norms for participation were mirrored across all forthcoming CMI groups, and 2) a quasi-experimental design would be used to allow CMI staff discretion for program recruitment and enrollment. The agreed upon primary research question was “Compared to a matched group of young adults who enrolled in CEO’s NYC office and were not offered CMI, were CMI participants more likely to achieve unsubsidized job placement?” Additionally, we tested if CMI participants were significantly more likely to achieve core program milestones and engage with transitional employment as compared to non-CMI young adult participants.

REDUCING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS

The treatment group was comprised of participants who enrolled into CMI between April 2018 and May 2020 in the CEO New York City site (Manhattan and Bronx-satellite locations) (N = 259). Approximately 51 percent of the CMI enrollees received services through the Bronx office. The average age of CMI participants was 22.84 years, and roughly half of participants had less than a high school education. As compared to the overall CEO NYC young adult enrollees during the same time period (April 2018–May 2020; N = 1,991), CMI enrollees were overall more likely to be African-American, female, and referred from a non-parole source. On average, CMI participants were younger and had completed fewer years of formal education than other CEO NYC young adults. All cited differences between the groups were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Using historic

CEO program data as a point of reference, the demographic factors to which the CMI group were more likely to identify overlapped with factors of lower comparative engagement and success overall. At this stage of the outcome evaluation, it appeared the CMI staff's recruitment process, which mixed professional intuition with prior interaction with the enrolled participants, adequately identified the "harder to reach" within the NYC young adult cohort.

Between April 2018 and June 2020, CMI participants engaged with CEO program components and staff members at a significantly higher level than other young adults on average. CMI participants completed over 60 percent more transitional employment work hours and engaged in over 60 percent more job coaching sessions than other CEO young adults; both differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Overall, CMI participants were more successful in achieving program milestones. CMI participants were both more likely to achieve Job Start Ready status (that is, prepared for unsubsidized employment) and more often placed in full-time work positions ($p < 0.01$). The difference between the groups in achieving the 180-day job retention milestone for unsubsidized work was not statistically significant. The structure of rigor of these comparative analyses mirrored those used in Arches evaluation but were, however, alone insufficient for our overall learning goal to inform various scalable strategies to improve young adult performance. In addition to lacking causal inference, the analyses were limited in identifying what specific components would be most worthwhile to test in other offices. We knew that the probability of initially securing funding to scale the entire intervention across all offices would be low.

Given the significant demographic differences between the CMI sample and the overall NYC young adult enrollment population, a propensity score matching technique was performed to extract a one-to-one matched comparison subset. Potential confounding variables included in the analysis were age, date/location of enrollment, level of education, race/ethnicity, gender, and referral source. Eight participants from the CMI sample were removed due to insufficient matches within the non-CMI population; ultimately, 251 CMI enrollees were linked with non-CMI young adult enrollees. In contrast to the differences between the CMI and the full young adult population, the matched groups did not differ significantly on age, gender, race, or educational attainment. The percent difference in referral source (that is, parole versus non-parole) between the CMI and comparison groups

remained significant. CEO engagement variables were excluded from the matching procedure to compare the program performance of participant groups with similar demographic characteristics. On average, CMI participants worked 43.4 more hours of transitional work than participants in the comparison group, a significant difference at the $p < 0.01$ level. CMI participants were twice as likely to both achieve Job Start Ready status ($p < 0.001$) and, ultimately, obtain an unsubsidized job placement ($p < 0.001$). Within the matched sample, job retention status at the 365-day milestone was significantly better for the CMI group ($p < 0.01$); the difference at 180 days was not statistically significant. When controlling for participant characteristics and enrollment conditions, engagement with staff and participant race were significantly associated with likelihood of young adults achieving placement in an unsubsidized job. Each additional staff interaction impacted the odds of success positively by a factor 5 ($p < 0.001$). Participants who identified as Black were 65 percent less likely to achieve unsubsidized job placement within the matched sample.

CMI yielded a successful pilot for CEO, particularly when highlighting the comparative engagement and employment outcomes for young adults with the greatest barriers with those of our typical young adult population. However, when we regrouped with our internal and external stakeholders to unpack the results and devise next steps for the program, we focused on the inconclusive results on the full CMI model differentiating outcomes for the “hardest to reach” group. The key driver within that reduced subset was increased interaction with program staff. We facilitated a series of group learning sessions centered on the pilot results with different combinations of our current funders, government partners, organization-wide staff, and current and former participants. As we continue replication studies of the original CMI model, some of the questions we continue to explore include: Should we mandate a certain number of interactions between staff and high-risk participants? Would available methods for identification be accurate and valid? What are the ethical implications of stratifying our young adult cohorts?

REFLECTIONS

The CMI pilot was made possible by years of insights collected from job coaches, job developers, and managers on the unique risks faced by our program’s youngest enrollees. The experiences of our young adults were

captured in case notes and program feedback, and via individual conversations, but needed to be synthesized to inform a testable hypothesis of how CEO could improve its services. Our practitioners' collaboration with program support staff on data quality yielded a system that easily could store and elevate participant voice alongside individual outcome data. For staff, CMI helped clarify the *why* of how those ongoing investments in evaluation infrastructure, thus closing the misperceived gap between research and practice.

CEO's shift to generating actionable evidence has required buy-in from staff across the entire organization. Internally, the CMI pilot is used as an exemplar for maximizing our data system and optimizing our research and development capability. Similarly, the story of the process has resonated with our regional partner organizations and government stakeholders more than the results of the pilot. CEO is playing an active role as evangelist and collaborator in support of accelerated evidence generation within the social sector.