

Testimony to NYC City Council Committee on Criminal Justice

Public Hearing

September 29, 2023

Moses EL-Sun White
Senior Case Manager
Children, Youth & Family Services



Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Moses EL-Sun White. I am Senior Case Manager in the Children, Youth & Family Services division at Osborne Association. Osborne is a 90-year-old nonprofit dedicated to transforming the criminal legal system and supporting individuals, families, and communities affected by incarceration.

Since 2014, Osborne has provided Next STEPS programming at Butler and Castle Hill Houses in the Bronx, serving more than 350 young people aged 16-24 and their families. Next STEPS is unique for its onsite mentoring services in NYCHA developments with the highest rates of violence and arrest in New York City.

Next STEPS was launched as part of the Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety by the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice. It is a modified version of the Arches program, using an evidence-based interactive journaling curriculum that is anchored in cognitive behavioral principles and delivered by mentors known as credible messengers. These highly trained professionals have backgrounds similar to the populations they serve, often including prior criminal justice system involvement.

We know this combination of evidence-based curriculum and credible messenger mentoring works. An evaluation of Arches, conducted by the Urban Institute and funded by the Office for Economic Opportunity, showed that participants were significantly less likely to be reconvicted of a crime compared to peers. It showed gains in participants' self-perception, emotion regulation, and future orientation. And it demonstrated that staff created a family-like atmosphere through 24/7, one-on-one support.

I have seen firsthand the impact of Next STEPS on young adults. Many are struggling to find their way in the world, due to experiences of trauma, violence, and racism. They rely on us for guidance on all kinds of issues - family relationships, finding work, and more - and we are here for them every step of the way. We provide job readiness training, resume building, educational and professional development, and transformative mentoring in a safe space. We cross gang boundaries to create breakthroughs, and we are active in our mentees' lives long after they graduate.

One former mentee, Sha'Quinn, says that without the support that credible messengers provided, he would have nothing but the streets. With our guidance, he developed the skills to get his life on track. He got his driver's license, built a resume, and secured employment. He is now a thriving young man who is gainfully employed with a family of his own. Sha'Quinn's success is a testament to the power of this program to help participants build a brighter future for themselves. This program accomplishes the very goals outlined in the Mayor's [Blueprint for Community Safety](#).

Despite the demonstrated positive outcomes of Next STEPS, we were given just a few days' notice of the program's cancellation. When we broke the news to the young people, they blamed themselves. They asked us: What did we do wrong? Who can we talk to now?

I put those same questions to you today: What did they do wrong? Who can they talk to now?

We believe in the transformative power of mentoring from skilled credible messengers. We urge the Department of Probation to restore this critical program. A decade-plus of investment to tackle disparities and ensure that all young people share in the promise of success must not go to waste.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.