



# My Brother's Keeper Community & Stakeholder Planning Process:

Recommendations to Improve Access and Quality  
of Out of School Programs

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Colleen Cain, Ph.D. & Jamil Bey, Ph.D.  
UrbanKind Institute

Authors' Note, Acknowledgement, and Disclaimer

This report and set of recommendations was prepared at the request of the Sprout Fund on behalf of My Brother's Keeper, a partnership between the City of Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, and multiple community partners from across the region. The Heinz Endowments generously funded the project. The goal was to identify gaps in out-of-school youth programming, attributes of ideal programmatic activities that achieve MBK's stated goals, existing resources that could be marshalled for this effort, and local and national best practices that are suitable for replication or scaling.

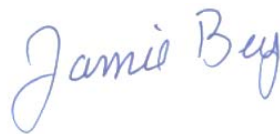
This report contains the findings of an intensive youth-led community engagement process across Allegheny County described herein. The summaries and conclusions reflect the findings of this process. The opinions or points of view expressed represent a consensus of the authors and are presented for informational purposes to expand the conversations around improving out-of-school experiences and opportunities for the targeted population. Opinions and recommendations do not necessarily represent or constitute approval, adoption or endorsement by My Brother's Keeper, the Heinz Endowments, or the facilitators of the respective sessions.

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Colleen Cain, Ph.D.  
Senior Research & Policy Analyst



Jamil Bey, Ph.D.  
Executive Director

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Cover photo: Youth facilitators in a panel discussion at the final community meeting at the Jeron X. Grayson Community Center

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Tayler Clemm, UrbanKind Institute, 611 Curtin Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15210. Alternatively, you may contact Tayler electronically: [tayler@urbankind.org](mailto:tayler@urbankind.org)

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## Community & Stakeholder Planning Process: Recommendations to Improve Access and Quality of Out of School Programs

In the fall of 2016, UrbanKind Institute facilitated conversations among and between young men, service providers, and others about out-of-school programming. This included seven public planning sessions in venues across Allegheny County. This report details the process and participation of those meetings, captures major and recurring themes that arose, and offers a set of recommendations to guide the Sprout Fund and others in supporting programs that seek to close the opportunity gap for youth in Pittsburgh.

### Community & Stakeholder Planning Process

In October and November of 2016, UrbanKind Institute facilitated seven meetings in locations across Allegheny County. The first three meetings (Phase 1) took place in McKeesport, Larimer (East End), and Sheridan (West Side). Between eight and 15 young men took part in each session. Service providers, parents, funders, community members, and others sat as “witnesses” to these discussions and had the opportunity for input and questioning. The idea was that the witnesses were there to see, listen, and learn from the participating young men. UrbanKind Institute then recruited a cohort of nine young men from the participants of these sessions. We trained the young men and gave each of them a stipend to facilitate the next three meetings (Phase 2) and keep a journal of their experience.

During the Phase 2 meetings in Knoxville (Hilltop) and Wilksburg, the young men had the chance to lead small group discussions with service providers about challenges, successes, and the use of

technology in their programming and outreach. At the Phase 2 meeting in Perry Hilltop (North Side), a program officer from the Buhl Foundation led a roundtable discussion with eight young men to recap what they discussed and learned in earlier sessions. The program officer also talked with the young men about the role of philanthropy and the challenging decisions that a program officer must consider when recommending programs for funding. The final meeting, the report out to the community, was held in Crawford Roberts in the Hill District. This session featured a panel discussion that included the nine young facilitators speaking in front of an audience of about 35 service providers, community members, and funders. One of the youth facilitators led the panel. The event concluded with a broader discussion and question & answer session with the audience.

Throughout the community and stakeholder planning process, participants were recruited through word-of-mouth, telephone, email, Facebook, and, to a lesser extent, flyers. UrbanKind staff filmed and photographed the events and took notes. We designed a one-page questionnaire, which service providers completed in Phase 2. We composed brief summaries of the events after viewing the footage, notes, and questionnaires (when applicable). The summaries and questionnaires are included in the Appendix. More details on event dates, locations, and participants are also available in the Appendix.

### Results

UrbanKind Institute identified several major and recurring themes that arose from

the discussions, particularly as they relate to needs and gaps in out-of-school youth programming, as well as to best practices and attributes of ideal programmatic activities that achieve the goals of the My Brother's Keeper Initiative (MBK).

### Needs and Gaps in Out-of-School Programming

The young men were clear about the need for better mentorship, more hands-on learning, a wider variety of program offerings, and exposure to life skills training. The participants agreed that they would like to see more young men to whom they can relate, socially and culturally, engaged as mentors and leaders of programs. They emphasized an interest in programming that offers action-oriented, hands-on experiences, including those that allow them to affect change in their own neighborhoods/cities. They expressed a desire to (possibly) receive recognition for their work. They would like to see more diversity in the programs, especially offerings in creative expression, and visual and graphic arts. They would also like opportunities to learn practical skills that they are not taught elsewhere, such as budgeting, tying a tie, changing a tire, and building a website, to name a few.

The young men were critical of traditional methods of program design and recruitment. The typical process of program design lacks the crucial elements of relationship-building and listening to young men first. The participants sought an approach that allows youth to express themselves and their needs rather than ideas/activities being imposed on them. Their thoughts on recruitment and advertising reiterate the importance of relationship-building. They described flyers as ineffective and thought that widespread use of social media (Facebook, Twitter,

Instagram, and Snapchat), texts, emails, or in-person invitations *from other young people* would be a more effective way of advertising programs and opportunities. They also recognized that using social media as a recruitment or program information strategy is not without its challenges; the person posting or sharing the information must be popular enough to have a dense network of followers and credible to youth. The young men also said that sharing success stories might encourage participation.

In their conversations with youth, service providers described funding as their greatest challenge to offering better programs. Many of the service providers recognize that they could better serve youth if they collaborated with organizations that offered complimentary services, but they believe that current funding structures and RFPs tend to encourage competition and not collaboration. Additionally, small community-based organizations (CBOs) have a difficult time securing funding to pursue long-term goals. They are usually overwhelmed by running current programs and are not able to expand their organizational capacity to pursue other funds or invest in program quality improvement. Long-term funding is also problematic. On the one hand, CBOs are encouraged to focus on a narrow mission of service and discouraged from "chasing money" to run programs that fall outside of their mission or that lie outside of their area of expertise. On the other hand, funders' priorities change, forcing service providers to adapt or go under.

Service providers also reported that programs are not always easy to get to in terms of transportation, nor found in places where youth feel comfortable and safe. Few programs offer transportation and public transportation is expensive and inefficient.

Additionally, the perception of violence in some areas of the city discourages participation from youth from outside of the area.

Lastly, most of the young men had a limited understanding of STEM education or digital badges. Many service providers use social media for outreach and to highlight accomplishments, but providers vary in the extent to which they incorporate digital, information, and/or advanced electronic technologies in their programming. CBOs are in the best position and are the most likely to be able to provide the relationships and mentoring opportunities that the process revealed as important to success. Yet, few CBOs have personnel with the skillsets and technical backgrounds to offer programs that provide experiences with emerging digital and information technologies. Even larger and well-funded tech programs rarely offered the type of ongoing programming that was necessary (1) to build the types of personal relationships that the young men desired and (2) to offer an in-depth tech experience that provided enough exposure for the participants to develop skills and interests. Two exceptions include 1Hood Media and Steeltown Entertainment Project's Youth and Media programs. Others, the Summer Learn & Earn experience, for example are less desirable because provide sufficient time to develop in-depth interests or relationships. Participants do not have enough time to build relationships with staff and learn enough about the technologies to decide which aspect of it they like.

#### Best Practices & Ideal Programmatic Activities

The young men and service providers alike offered insight into best practices and attributes of programmatic activities that achieve MBK's stated goals, all of which are suitable for replication or scaling.

Quality elements that promote long term success include:

- Partnerships with schools
- Consistency and care
- Clear expectations
- Peer and near-peer mentoring
- Accessibility
- Continuum of program services
- Year-round programming
- Opportunities to stay connected
- Hands-on activities with real world applications
- Youth input

While it is difficult to include each of these elements, the best programs have some combination of most of them.

#### Partnerships with schools

Schools host or serve as partners with many of the best programs. In addition to giving a sense of legitimacy, schools often offer secure spaces and transportation options. All three of these elements ranked high when we asked young men to describe desirable elements in program design. Still, excellent programs exist outside of formal school buildings.

#### Consistency and care

It is unlikely to be a surprise to anyone that youth participants want to feel like program staff care about them as individuals. We heard repeatedly that youth want relationships with caring and supportive adults. But relationships and trust take time to build, which is why participants want programs in which they can take part over several years and where there is little turnover of staff from year to year. Service providers echoed this sentiment when they said that programs that retain participants are spaces where kids feel loved and listened to, and where they feel a sense of belonging and stability.

### **Clear expectations**

Some participants suggested that youth are best served when program expectations are communicated and understood. Youth should know what is expected of them in terms of attendance and participation, for example. Youth should also know what a program can and cannot offer them (skills, experiences, etc.) so that they can make informed decisions about participation.

### **Peer and near-peer mentoring**

It is important to have someone to whom the participants can relate, socially and culturally, and preferably someone slightly older. Peer and near-peer mentoring offer an added benefit: when young people are responsible for another person's success in a program, they learn valuable lessons in leadership and other beneficial social and professional skills.

### **Accessibility**

Accessibility is crucial for success and consistent attendance. Accessibility typically refers to being easily reached, entered, or used by all potential participants. Beyond physical barriers to access that may include stairs or narrow entryways, programs must also be accessible via public transportation or geographically proximate to participants. Other barriers to accessibility include costs, registration requirements (e.g., residency, parental consent, school enrollment), and age limits.

### **Continuum of program services**

Program participants' needs are best met when programs can offer a continuum of services to choose from, go between, or grow into. For example, The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh's Tech U offers a suite of programs for middle through high school, allowing students to gain exposure, explore interests in digital technology fields, and

make professional connections through internships and site visits.

### **Year-round programming**

Some of the participants felt that programs should keep young people busy, safe, and "off the streets." Year-round programming is beneficial not just because of the potential for building long-term relationships with staff and other participants, but because it provides youth with something to do during the summer *and* after school during the rest of the year. Further, a year-round program can offer young people more in-depth learning experiences than a seasonal or temporary program.

### **Opportunity to stay connected**

When youth "age out" of a program, the program and the former participants miss an ideal skill-building and mentorship opportunity. By allowing youth to stay connected to a program over multiple years with increasing challenges and responsibilities, youth can continue to rely on those relationships, serve as mentors to young men just entering the program, and help to shape future programming.

### **Hands-on activities**

Programs that engage participants in hands-on, experiential learning are most attractive to the young men, many of whom felt that they learn best this way. Such learning would ideally focus on life skills and/or college and career preparation. The non-profit organization Omicelo Cares' DreamOn Festival is an excellent example of experiential learning. Youth participants plan, organize, and run an annual two-day music and ice cream festival in Market Square. Students learn to apply business and organizational skills to make profits and help their community.



## Youth Input

Young men seek to be more engaged in program design and to have opportunities to shape programs based on what they need and find relevant. Instead of a “one-size-fits all” approach to program design, some youth participants advocated for more personalization, including elements like developing individual goals, meeting youth where they are, or engaging in an assessment process when youth begin a new program.

## Recommendations

Based on the information generated during the MBK Community & Stakeholder Planning Process, UrbanKind Institute suggests several recommendations for the Sprout Fund and others to consider as they work to narrow the opportunity gap for youth in Pittsburgh. The recommendations, detailed below, are: support mentorship efforts; support more effective program outreach; incorporate life skills and incentives into youth training; bridge the gap between technology and mentorship; and leverage existing resources.

### Support Mentorship Efforts

We recommend that programs receive more support in their efforts to develop and retain mentors for participants. While recognizing that the demand for mentors for youth will always exceed the supply of willing mentors, our challenge is to reconsider the pool of mentors. As described above, young men value and seek mentoring relationships, especially other young men to whom they can relate, socially and culturally. Funders should recognize mentorship as fundamental to the success of any program, not just those that are focused solely on mentoring. To that end, funders could:

- Offer stipends to existing programs to provide financial incentives for former or older participants to serve as regular mentors
- Challenge current and potential grantees to work with existing mentoring organizations to develop new models of in-program mentorship

### Support More Effective Program Outreach

We recommend that programs be supported and encouraged in their efforts to improve outreach, which includes engagement and recruitment. Service providers need to move away from traditional methods like flyers, and toward more youth-friendly approaches like social media, text messaging, emails, and peer-to-peer invitations. They need to take advantage of schools and libraries as places to engage in meaningful outreach and recruitment, not just places to post flyers. To strengthen outreach efforts funders could:

- Require applicants to describe their approach and process of outreach and recruitment
- Consider outreach methods as a factor in proposal selection
- Fund “youth councils” to advise existing and developing programs on their outreach (among other things), if the program has the capacity to continue using suggested methods

### Incorporate Life Skills and Incentives into Youth Training

We recommend that youth training incorporates life skills and incentives. Many of the young men expressed an interest in learning a variety of life skills that are not typically taught at school, anything from fixing a tire to short and long-term budgeting. Additionally, several participants said that financial incentives are the most

successful way to get youth to participate in training programs. To make youth training programs more relevant and attractive, funders can:

- Support hands-on life skills workshops at existing organizations
- Offer catalytic grants to new organizations that seek to teach life-skills
- Support training programs that offer financial incentives for participants or provide enough funds to programs that wish to offer incentives

### Bridge the Gap between Technology and Mentorship

As previously described, organizations and programs that are most able to provide the mentoring relationships that youth seek are not always the same as those most able to offer ongoing opportunities in digital information and technology, etc. Thinking about technology and mentorship in tandem raises questions about the benefits and attractiveness (to youth) of short-term technology programs. Funders can help bridge the gap between technology and mentorship if they:

- Support better mentoring in programs that are strong in technology programming
- Boost the technology capacity and offerings of existing programs where youth trust and relate to staff
- Support year-round programming, which can achieve stronger relationships *and* more in-depth learning

### Leverage Existing Resources

We recommend that funders work with local organizations to close the accessibility gap to top-notch STEAM opportunities in programs offered by local universities and

museums. In addition to programs for middle and high school students like Project SEED at Duquesne University, Investing Now at the University of Pittsburgh, Penn State's Summer Experience in Earth and Mineral Sciences (SEEMS), and the programs of the Gelfand Center at Carnegie Mellon University, the Carnegie Museums and the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts provide a wide range of intensive and high quality learning experiences. Still, these programs are inaccessible to MBK's target population. Costs, space limitations, transportation, promotions/ marketing, and relationships with community organizations and schools act as barriers to participation. To leverage the relationships that some CBOs have with youth to make connections with high-quality and high-impact STEAM programs, funders could:

- Establish a fund for scholarships to students from families with low incomes to attend enrichment courses and programs offered by local universities and museums
- Support the creation of a resource position that could serve as added capacity in service of several organizations. This person could work to connect youth participants to external programs
- Support a network of inter-neighborhood activities bus transportation for program participants

## Conclusions

One of the strongest themes arising from the MBK Community & Stakeholder Planning Process was the crucial role of mentorship in youth programming. It appears that even the most relevant, well-funded programs, including those programs on digital information and technology, will

not succeed in reaching young men or in retaining participants if the youth cannot relate to or trust the staff, or if the recruitment consists only of an impersonal flyer. The challenge for the Sprout Fund and others will be to support this relationship-building while at the same time addressing the demand for programmatic content that provides relevant training and life skills education.

Going forward, the Sprout Fund and other funders will be most successful in helping to close the opportunity gap for youth in the region if we work to better understand additional challenges that are related but outside of the scope of this engagement. Two questions remain.

1. How do we understand the role of quality in a program and how do we promote quality improvements?

Programs are iterative and provide opportunities for learning; they should be subjected to a quality improvement process. It seems that much of philanthropy's approach has been to "throw money" at the problem. This has not worked. New funding strategies should connect quality improvement assessments with investments in targeted solutions with evidence-based outcomes.

2. How do we target funding to areas of the Pittsburgh region where youth are?

Some neighborhoods have more to offer youth than others. Particularly in neighborhoods in the east, there are more program spaces than there are youth. In other areas, like the south hilltop

neighborhoods, there are few programs and few options for youth. Additionally, our region's demographics continue to change. Many African-Americans are moving out of the city and into outlying areas where homes are more affordable. These areas are far removed from frequent public transportation and many social services. Understanding existing offerings and lack thereof—particularly for catalytic grant-making—could help to improve outcomes in those neighborhoods that are underserved.

Another way to approach the concept of "underserved" is to think about the special needs and circumstances of new immigrants in the Pittsburgh region. Populations from Central America, East Africa, and South Central Asia are growing in the region. They face language and cultural barriers in a city that is notoriously hostile and un-welcoming to non-European populations. Are current programs reaching young men in these populations? And what special challenges that these groups face might act as barriers to MBK goals?

Finally, the young men who took part in the MBK process enjoyed the experience of working together, sharing ideas, and becoming facilitators. They are eager to keep working together and build on the momentum that was clear at the final report out event. Their group and others like them are well-prepared to advise and offer input on existing and developing programs geared toward young men.