

Chapter 10

A Second Chance

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the history of the Second Chance Books Program, a partnership between the Austin Public Library and the Gardner Betts Juvenile Justice Center. It covers the initiation of the partnership in 2002, through the early days and challenges, the growth of the partnership in 2007, and the maturation of the program in 2010. The focus is on the challenges encountered by a maturing community partnership and the resolution of those challenges. Topics include coordination of administrative tasks, transitional leadership, maintaining partnerships through staffing changes, strengthening partner buy-in, and funding concerns for long-term partnerships. The goal of the chapter is to help librarians with established or budding long-term partnerships strategize ways to prepare for and resolve problems encountered along the way.

INTRODUCTION

Second Chance Books is a nearly decade-long collaboration between the Austin Public Library (APL) and the Gardner Betts Juvenile Justice Center (GBJJC) of Travis County. The library provides two satellite libraries at Gardner Betts, as well as programs targeting reluctant readers. This case study details several of the challenges the program faced while establishing and maintaining a long-term community partnership, and the efforts to improve and expand the program over time. While some difficulties outlined here may

be unique to working in a correctional facility, the majority will be relevant to the establishment and maintenance of lasting partnerships.

Our specific challenges over the past eight years reflect the complexity of a partnership such as this. One of the program's earliest challenges was simply securing library administration support for what could be seen as an extraneous program, particularly in a time of budget cuts. The program also went through a transition of leadership, where the program's founder passed control to a program administrator, to ensure its longevity and continued growth. This required

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the transition of longstanding relationships with community partners, a process that was made more challenging by the departure of several key staff members at the partner agencies.

Additionally, due to a lack of models of public library service to incarcerated youth, and the learning curve in developing this partnership, many of the policies that might otherwise have been put in place at the outset of a new venture were not implemented until later when the program had already solidified. Reluctance of correctional center staff to work with the library in the process of developing new policies meant that some later attempts to improve the partnership through policy changes were thwarted. Following a period of intense challenges for our partner agency, the program suffered from a lack of staff support, making it more challenging for the librarians to work with the partner agency and straining the limited time that library staff had available for programming at the facility. These tensions in turn contributed to library staff burnout, leaving the programming team short-handed.

Other long-term challenges included coordinating programs for very overbooked teens, with partner staff who were understaffed and overworked themselves, causing frustration for librarians on the team who felt like their time was being wasted. The program struggled each time it lost team members to attrition—librarians who moved up or moved on—because recruiting new team members had not previously been a standardized or formalized process, and training new members took a significant investment of time. Today, many of these challenges have been resolved and the partnership is stronger as a result. We hope that the exploration of our efforts will be beneficial to others in earlier stages of their partnerships.

BACKGROUND

Second Chance Books has a vision of decreasing the recidivism of incarcerated youth in the Austin community through increased literacy skills and an engagement with reading for pleasure and personal betterment. The goals of the Second Chance Books Project are to improve the literacy levels and literary engagement of incarcerated youth in Austin and to increase incarcerated youths' awareness of the library and librarians as beneficial resources to their lifelong success once they re-enter society. We do this by intercepting at-risk youth at a critical juncture in their lives, introducing them to reading for pleasure through sustained relationships with librarians skilled at working with reluctant readers. We also provide special programs to enhance residents' engagement by hosting author visits, writing workshops, art and technology programs, and other special events.

The youth that we work with often have not read much outside of school and very rarely for their personal enjoyment. Their reading levels are low for teens—often on a fifth grade level—and their experiences with reading have been a dreary struggle, when they attempted to read at all. Incarceration cuts youth off from both the personal interactions with friends and family, as well as the hyper-connected outside world, where those with similar experiences are only a click or text away. Denied nearly all personal and virtual connections with people outside the facility, the solitary experience of incarceration becomes doubly isolating. For these youth, a character in a book with a similar history to their own can become a lifeline, and a friend.

When a librarian is able to connect a teen with a book that he or she needs, not only is the teen given a tool to cope with their own challenges, but a powerful bond of trust is formed. Librarians are not the only adults interacting with these teens—they are surrounded by correctional center staff, who form a family unit and provide a stability that many of them have never experienced. The

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