

Mission Moment: The Relatives On Ramp Program

By Katie Hallaway

How do we as a community meet the needs of youth who have aged out of the foster care and juvenile justice systems and face tremendous challenges to becoming independent adults?



With the help of a federal grant, Charlotte had been working to address this serious problem when The Relatives, a youth support agency, launched the On Ramp program in August 2009.

On Ramp provides a resource center for young adults 16 to 24 years old in Mecklenburg County who may need a variety of services and tools to make the transition to being an independent adult. Those areas include education, housing, employment, health and safety, and life functioning.

Brennon Graham, The Relatives Executive Director, said they expected to serve around 15 young people that first year – instead, they reached nearly 100.

“We quickly realized the need was much greater,” said Graham, who has worked with youth and young adults for nearly 20 years.

In 2013 The Relatives received an \$80,000 Women’s Impact Fund grant. On Ramp has grown its services and developed its one-stop resource center and staff.

At our annual meeting on May 20, Graham highlighted the importance of the grant to the success of the program. He pointed to the “credibility” associated with a Women’s Impact Fund grant, saying it has helped the organization leverage additional funds from other grants, corporations and individual donors.

Last year On Ramp served more than 700 individuals. On Ramp cliets work with counselors and specialists to assess their goals and set their own “futures plan” to achieve independence and stability. This is client-driven; the staff does not dictate the plan or give advice.

In describing the program’s approach, Graham emphasized the importance of learning from experiences and even mistakes.

“If a client wants to be a rocket scientist, our job is to help them become a rocket scientist,” he said. “As they go through the process, they may determine that goal isn’t realistic. Maybe they would find more success in another profession. But they are driving the plan for themselves.”

While the clients are young people, Graham said they are dealing with very real adult issues, such as homelessness and unemployment. Some have children themselves.

Graham underscored On Ramp's holistic approach to empower clients to succeed despite multiple barriers, bringing together a range of services, partner organizations and volunteers to help meet all their critical needs.

The resource center offers workshops on topics such as independent living, personal finance, safety and health, and last year they started a GED program that is benefitting many in completing their education. They also provide opportunities to explore various professions, such as photography and technology.

While schools, churches, shelters and community organizations make referrals to On Ramp, around 75 percent of new clients report they found the program through other youth.

"We have spent no money on marketing," said Graham. "Kids who have benefitted from the program are bringing other kids in."

Graham anticipates the growth of On Ramp to continue. Around seven months ago they started a street outreach program, in which counselors go out and connect with young adults on the streets. They first focused on a few blocks of uptown Charlotte, and a recent donation of a van will allow them to expand to other high need areas.

At On Ramp, independent living for these young people doesn't mean being alone.

"We believe that every child deserves a safe place to sleep and a fighting chance to make it," said Graham. "They are going to struggle, but we're going to struggle together."