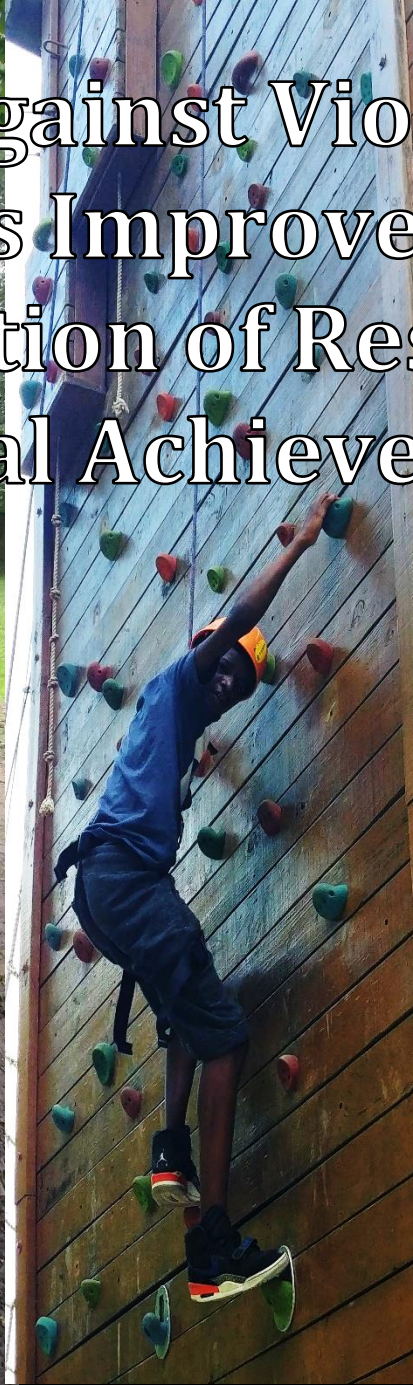
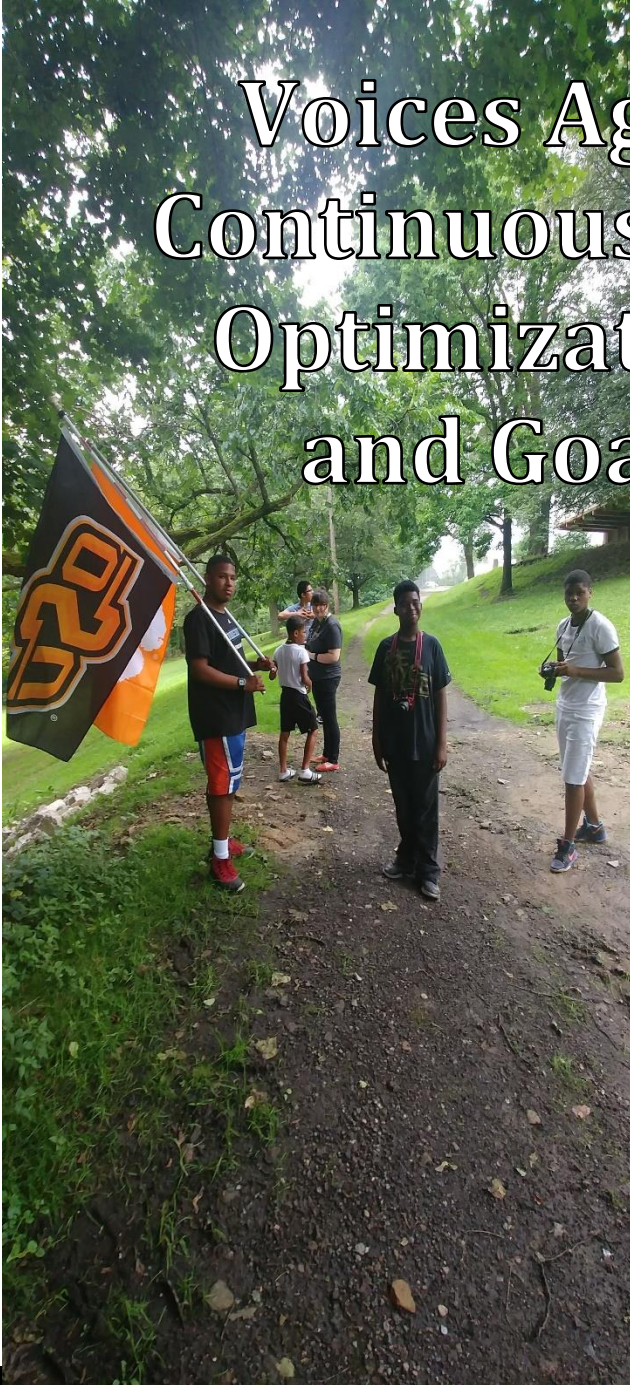


Voices Against Violence - Continuous Improvement for Optimization of Resources and Goal Achievement



With the goal of optimizing the limited resources available to non-profit organizations in the Pittsburgh, PA region, and ensuring continual improvement in the quality of their programming for area youth, Voices Against Violence requested an independent evaluation of their Summer Camp Experience. The content of this report reflects the observations and analysis of the researcher from May through August 2019.



If the root is strong, the fruit will be sweet. ~ Robert Nesta Marley

“Men (*people*) are so constituted that they derive their conviction of their own possibilities largely from the estimate formed of them by others. If nothing is expected of a people, that people will find it difficult to contradict that expectation.”

~ Frederick Douglas, excerpted from a speech given to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in April 1865.



Executive Director

Richard Carrington, Sr., the Founder and Executive Director of Voices Against Violence (VAV), grew up in Beltzhoover neighborhood of Pittsburgh and is the father of ten children through marriage, adoption, and fostering.

Mr. Carrington is a decorated disabled veteran who proudly served in the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne. He spent his last five years of military service as an instructor at the United States Military Intelligence School in Ft. Devens, MA.

He attended various universities earning degrees, including a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics from Carnegie Mellon University.

Richard Carrington, Sr. has received numerous awards including the first-ever Gwendolyn J. Elliott Lifetime Achievement Award, the Center for Victims of Violent Crimes' Peacemaker of the Year, and the Iron Cross Ministries' Humanitarian Award.

History of the Organization

Voices Against Violence (VAV) grew out of a street outreach initiative by Richard Carrington, Sr. working with Pittsburgh gang members in 1992. It became one of the first and foremost anti-violence organizations in Pittsburgh, pioneering programs in Street Mediation, Conflict Resolution, Restorative Justice, and Reparative Practices. In addition to actively leading this group which has evolved to become a critical community resource, Richard serves as an advisor and consultant to numerous youth and violence-prevention related groups, including Pittsburgh Public School District, the Coalition Against Violence, South Pittsburgh Peacemakers, and Pittsburgh's Citizen Police Review Board.

Since 1997, this community-focused organization has developed and implemented numerous anti-violence programs, conducted conflict mediation and resolution, created school-based programs, facilitated parent groups, managed workforce development and summer employment programs, and cultivated other leaders who have since branched off to start their own programs. In addition, Voices Against Violence hosts a free summer camp for area youth ages 4 to 14, which in its twenty-third year.

Background

The Summer Camp program began as a means to actively engage Beltzhoover-Allentown-Knoxville (BAK) area youth during the summer months, while they were out of school and had few positive activities available. McKinley Park and its Community Center, a neighborhood resource, serves as the location for Voices Against Violence meetings, as well became the perfect natural setting from which to host a summer experience for urban youth.



When Voices Against Violence instituted their free Summer Camp, there were no other organizations or programming similar to them in the area. Since then, other groups have also launched in the neighborhood and one started a program with camp activities. Over the years, camp attendance has fluctuated from 50 in the

first year, to as many as 323 in 2012. There have also been changes in the format of VAV's camp over the years. It began as a one-week excursion to a camp in the Allegheny Mountains for youth from St. Clair Village and Beltzhoover at time when the two neighborhoods were adversaries. After three years, there was

a shift to the more traditional multi-week day camp, in addition to the week in the Allegheny Mountains. In 2016, the overnight camping in the mountains was discontinued. Themes have also changed over time from a cultural exploration focus utilizing the principles of Ma' At to a broader-based "Summer Experience" in more recent years. It is a primary mission of the camp to ensure participants have a positive sense of self and their cultural heritage, develop a personal vision for future goals and accomplishments, and become contributing members of the community, as well as enjoying new experiences and good, old-fashioned summer camp fun.



Impact of Summer Camp

Local community leaders and neighborhood residents, including the Beltzhoover Seniors Group who share the McKinley Park Community Center with the camp during the summer months, have noted the positive impact it makes in the lives of the children and the area.

Creating Community Connections

Mrs. Marge Thompson, a long-time Beltzhoover resident and retired registered nurse, noted, "The Voices Against Violence Camp at McKinley Park makes a big impact in the community and has for many years. It provides a safe haven where children learn and are engaged in all kinds of activities throughout the summer." Unfortunately, children living in marginalized neighborhoods do not often have these opportunities due to lack of resources and unsafe neighborhoods, which puts them at an increased disadvantage. Research from the Urban Institute notes disadvantage multiplies over generations, and programs created to address these challenges need to include several generations. Community member, Mrs. Dorothy R. McCoy, shared another favorable perspective, "The camp is well-managed, and the children are very respectful. As a senior, that makes me feel safer in the neighborhood." This interaction between residents of various age groups from the youngest, four-years-old camper, to teenage junior counselors, to camp staff in their twenties to fifties, and the members of the Beltzhoover Seniors Group helps to build new connections across multiple generations and rebuild a sense of community.



Leading to a Love of Learning

Socioeconomic status has a direct impact on many student outcomes (Putnam, 2015), and some of this can be attributed to the amount and types of enrichment and out-of-school activities available to children. The Voices Against Violence camp has a refreshing blend of traditional free play and structured learning activities. There has been a steady decline in the amount of "Free Play" for children, and this has been accompanied by an increase in depression, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness, as well as an increase in narcissism and decreased empathy, which could be related to the upturn of bullying (Gray, 2013). Beyond the typical activities found in similar camps in the area, like basketball and dance or cheerleading, the VAV groups had Art twice a week with local artist, Ernest Bey, and enjoyed environmental programs with Tree Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. The Carnegie Library and the Science Center encouraged discovery through reading and the exploration of some STEM-related (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) activities. Campers cooled off at the Moore Park Pool in Brookline two



afternoons a week, participated in varied field trips on Fridays that included a cookout at Moraine State Park, a visit to an area petting zoo, and culminated with a day at Kennywood. Weekly outings with Venture Outdoors were also a huge hit, and area youth had experiences with kayaking and challenge courses, as well as biking and fishing. *When asked about campers who might be nervous when trying a new activity, Counselor Jordan Dennis offered, "Many of the counselors where campers in past years. We know what it feels like to be presented with an activity that may seem scary at first because we've lived it. So, we can talk the campers through things so they feel comfortable trying something new."* In keeping with the mission of Voices Against Violence, campers discuss the weekly themes to "Stay **STRONG**" – Success, Truth, Relationships, Optimism, Non-Violence, and Growth." These conversations help students to not only foster a more positive perspective but also develop valuable skills.



Patti Robinson, a school counselor in the North Hills and member of Moms Demand Action, volunteered once a week at the VAV Camp, providing stories with accompanying crafts and cooking activities. Patti shared her perspective, *"I am so glad I had a chance to work at the camp this summer. It was wonderful to be with the young children and see their enjoyment of different activities and their interactions with the teens. As much as I enjoyed being with the 4 – 7 years old children--and truly loved the different personalities--I was also so encouraged to see the young men and women and their involvement with the youngsters and their help in running the camp. It was wonderful to observe young people engaging in such a positive experience*

and to see the leadership of many of the teens who participated."

Workforce Development

This year, there were 130 campers and more than forty junior counselors who worked twenty-five hours a week through Allegheny County's Phase 4 and Bridges "Learn & Earn" Summer Youth Employment Programs. Richard M. Carrington, Sr., Voices Against Violence Executive Director, is cognizant of the duality of the relationship. These junior counselors ensure there is a low counselor-to-camper ratio, providing a significant opportunity for these younger employees to acquire valuable skills, as well as develop into role models for the youth attending camp. He notes, *"We want this to be fun for everyone involved, and we also recognize this may be the first real job for many of our junior counselors. So, it's a learning experience for them as well, an opportunity to develop essential workforce skills such as time management, interpersonal relations,*

and communications skills. Over time, the junior staff members mature and advance to developing leadership skills."

"Leaders don't create followers; they create more leaders."

~ Tom Peters, famous researcher, consultant, writer, and management guru

leaders. Through the years, many young people who started out as campers in elementary school later became staff members, which they consider to be a significant rite of passage into adulthood. *Senior Camp Counselor, Corey Fields, age 22 and a Business student at Temple University, shared his personal perspective, "I remember being a camper and how much fun I had. Now, it's my time to give back and provide the same for the next generation."* During the 2019 Summer Camp, more than 75% of the

Older teens and adults from the community serve as counselors and camp



Senior Counselors were participants in the Voices Against Violence summer camps as elementary or middle school aged children.



Cultural Competency

Additionally, the campers benefitted through positive interactions with junior counselors who not only came from many neighborhoods around the city but also several who were immigrants from a variety of countries in Africa and South East Asia, making it a more diverse cultural learning experience. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 2018 report, *Preparing Our Youth for an Inclusive and Sustainable World*, current technology, economic, cultural, and environmental factors present both opportunities and challenges for today's youth. Successfully navigating this ever-evolving world requires a global competency, which they define as: *the capacity to examine local, global, and intercultural issues; to understand and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others; to engage in open, appropriate, and effective interaction with people from different cultures; and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development.* For young people with limited opportunities for intercultural interactions or global exploration, their VAV summer camp experience laid the positive foundation to begin developing the global cultural competency which could be an asset when seeking future employment.

Program Analysis

The longevity of the Voices Against Violence Summer Camp is testimony to the personal commitment of Executive Director Richard Carrington, Sr. and the dedication of community members who are devoted staff members year after year. Philanthropic support from the Birmingham Foundation and the Pittsburgh Foundation and donations from supporters in the Pittsburgh area ensure the children in the Beltzhoover-Allentown-Knoxville and surrounding neighborhoods enjoy some of the traditional summer camp experiences more affluent youth may take for granted. *When students are in a nurturing environment and held to high expectations, they begin to believe in themselves and develop the skills needed to overcome adversity and flourish socially, emotionally, physically, and academically (Pizzolongo and Hunter, 2005).* Caring relationships are essential where so many children struggle with the



repercussions of trauma, and VAV camp staff receives training to ensure every camper is warmly welcomed, respected, feels safe, and receives much needed time and attention, in addition to participating in fun activities. Communication and collaboration are cultivated among the counselors and staff during the week-long training, optimizing their wide range of talents and experience. The natural environment of McKinley Park is also an asset when addressing the trauma and resulting stress many of the camp's participants experience. *Data shows these types of surroundings and outdoor activities increase a person's sense of awe and help the brain to relax and heal (Anderson, Monroy, & Keltner, 2018).*

Celebration of Success

The Voices Against Violence Summer Camp continues into its third decade of making a positive impact in the lives of neighborhood children and building a stronger sense of community. Gwen, age 11 and a participant of many years, shared, *"I love coming to camp every day!"* Despite some extreme temperature over extended periods of time, the junior counselors were not only motivated to build their résumé and earn an hourly wage but were also dedicated to cultivating meaningful connections and ensuring the children had a positive experience every day. *Aung Myint Mya, a Baldwin High School Student and first-year Learn &*





Earn participant, responded when asked about his job at the VAV summer camp, "It's not work when you're having fun!" Over the ten weeks of observations, it was quite apparent the participants were excited to come to camp each day, enjoyed spending time with their friends and the counselors, and looked forward to the special activities available through the VAV Summer Experience programming. Camper safety is a top priority for Voices Against Violence, and continues to be a hallmark of the organization. This year, to address a parent's security concern, camper pick-up procedures were changed to ensure precautions were put in place to verify the identity of the person and confirm they were an individual authorized

to pick up a particular child. Although this was more formal than in past years, and took some adjustment on the part of the camp staff and the campers' families, it has since become standard operating procedure.

Aspirations for Improvement

In order to continue and strengthen the legacy of the Voices Against Violence Summer Camp experience, the organization aspires to improve, especially in the areas of planning and organization. *Rowan Zellars, a former camper, junior counselor, and 19-year-old college student at Lincoln University, reflected on her experience as a camper, "I think we had additional outside service providers who facilitated programs back when I was a camper. I'd like to see us do that again and give the kids an opportunity to learn and do more."* With this goal in mind,



concerted advanced planning would be beneficial, due to the limited time and resources available to the various area providers of youth programming. Outreach to organizations like Penn State Extension Services, Eden Hall of Chatham University, and other groups should take place no later than November, ensuring the VAV Camp is on their schedule for the upcoming summer. More diverse programs; especially those related to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) for both the girls and the boys would be beneficial for area youth. An expansion of the Arts program, perhaps including drama, dance, spoken word poetry, world drumming, or Capoeira would be great alternatives for the children. Additional activities with an environmental focus, through Grow Pittsburgh or Phipps Conservatory would also be valuable for campers. Also, the master schedule for camp should be finalized a month prior to the start of camp.



Implementing a strategy for advertising and advanced registration would be helpful. It is important camp fliers are posted in local stores, libraries, and places of worship and information is in neighborhood newspapers and on social media outlets starting in Mid-April. The capability to register online would also make it easier for families. Follow-up calls and emails to everyone who is registered is essential, as there were a significant number of participants who completed the registration process but never attended, resulting in unnecessary expenses for supplies. Letters and emails should

be sent to the family of each camper prior to the start of camp to explain Drop-off and Pick-up procedures, safety protocols, and the camp's practice of conducting "security drills." Additionally, policies and practices should be formalized into an Operations Manual for the Voices Against Violence Camp. This would not only standardize staff hiring and training and procedures for the camp, but also provide continuity through the years, which is important, especially if there is a need at some point in the future for succession planning.

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