

CASE STUDY: ROCA

Transitional Jobs for Opportunity Youth

Transitional jobs (TJ) providers serving youth with barriers to employment emphasize that the TJ model helps youth prepare for the world of work by providing a safe and structured space for employment-related experiential learning. Within a TJ setting, youth can practice workplace skills, make and learn from mistakes alongside supportive staff, and understand and address their employment barriers so that they are better equipped to keep future jobs in the competitive labor market.

Roca: Boston, Chelsea, and Springfield, MA

[Roca](#) provides employment services, including transitional employment, to opportunity youth. Roca's target population is high-risk, justice-involved young men ages 17 to 24, who are not in school, are unwilling or unable to engage in traditional social service programming, and are on track to adult incarceration. These services are offered as part of a larger intervention model focused on helping high risk young people change their behaviors, get and keep jobs, and stay out of prison. As Lili Elkins, Roca's Chief Strategy Officer, puts it, "We're looking for the young people that are likely not ready for change; we work with young men that we have to go out, locate, and bring into services."

Roca's commitment to helping high-risk youth prepare for and succeed in employment stems from the belief that in order to truly change criminal behavior patterns, earn money in the legal labor market, and to stay out of prison, these youth need the opportunity to learn successful workplace behaviors so that they can get, keep, and advance in employment. [Recently selected](#) to lead a \$27 million social impact financing initiative to reduce recidivism among at-risk youth in Massachusetts, Roca's work is poised to become a model for the rest of the country.

Roca uses the transitional jobs (TJ) experience to help coach youth around behavior change. A key aspect of Roca's programming is that participants can get fired from the TJ program multiple times. When participants are fired, Roca works with them to identify and address the behaviors and barriers that have limited their ability to succeed in work. Once the issues are confronted, Roca allows youth to go through a "rehiring" process so they can try out TJ again. Allowing participants multiple chances to fail and try again lets Roca's staff—some of whom are former gang members themselves—work with young people to change the negative behaviors that are preventing them from successfully staying employed using tools such as motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral therapy, and restorative justice.

In 2014, Roca served 494 high-risk young men in Massachusetts with an 80 percent program retention rate. Of the young men retained in Roca's program model for at least 24 months, 92 percent had no new arrests and 89 percent had no technical violations. At the same time, 89 percent of the young men in Roca's program retained employment for at least 90 days. It's clear that Roca is living up to its vision—"less jail, more future."

Read [our blog](#): Youth + Jobs: A Pathway Out of Poverty, Incarceration, and Violence