

YouthBuild Programs Teach Skills and Character



In Compton, one young participant made his way to the mayor's office.

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Oscar Ramirez, 20, had an idea that would have been crazy a decade ago in Compton, California dedicate 1 percent of the police department's budget to youth development programs. He pitched it to the city's mayor, Aja Brown, and she said yes. "It took us a while, but we got it done," Ramirez says. Mayor Brown was so impressed with his speaking skills, she offered him an internship.

Working for the mayor is a far cry from Ramirez's upbringing. As gangs clashed in his neighborhood when he was younger, he was limited to going to school and going home to avoid the crossfire. "It's not a normal childhood," he says. "You see things that you shouldn't be seeing as a child. People shouldn't see anything like that in the first place. It keeps you out of communicating with other people."

The experience made him shy, unable to express himself to other people, which eventually led to fighting and being kicked out of several schools. "Our own defenses and our own isolation impact our ability to navigate society," says Sara Silva, co-founder and co-director of EntreNous Youth Empowerment Services (<http://www.entrenousyouth.org>). "When you live in an environment that's full of burnt-down, boarded-up buildings, where neighbor-hoods are not maintained, where there's no green space, where it's not safe, you start to believe that your life isn't worth very much."

Silva helps run (Compton YouthBuild (<http://www.comptonvouthbuild.org>), a program where at-risk youth can get their high school diplomas and certifications in construction and food services, with the goal of gaining jobs with union earnings. After a continuation school refused to admit Ramirez as a second-year senior, he was still focused on finishing high school but his options were limited. It was either adult school or YouthBuild. He chose the latter.

YouthBuild programs across the country, like this one in Compton, work with young people from high-poverty urban and rural neighborhoods. In September, the Labor Department announced \$76 million in grants (<https://www.youthbuild.org/update/us-department-labor-awards-757-million-youthbuild-grants>) to YouthBuild programs nationwide. There are 260 programs across the country (<https://www.youthbuild.org/program-directory>), having worked with over 10,000 students in 2014. EntreNous was awarded more than \$1 million.

"Success should never be determined by where a person starts in life," said Labor Secretary Thomas Perez in the announcement. "YouthBuild equips young people with the tools they need to realize their potential and job skills they need to climb career ladders and punch their tickets to the middle class."

For the last three years, the Compton program has offered job training and personal development to 82 graduates per year. With this new grant, they will offer more training in construction through in-depth coursework and onsite experience.

Ironically, Compton YouthBuild is housed in a building that used to be a juvenile courthouse. Down in the old mechanical room, circuit breakers still show what the rooms used to be: a district attorney's office, a lockup, and a judge's chambers.

When he decided to join the program, Ramirez warily went through the mandatory information meeting and 14-day Mental Toughness Orientation—a boot camp of sorts that builds trust and respect among classmates, breaking down personal barriers. "It's not an initiation," says Silva, "but it helps you determine whether young people are ready for this level of responsibility."

Ramirez was successful and was offered a spot in the 180-day program; the only cost was a small registration fee that covers uniforms and planners. Almost immediately, his classmates noticed his ability to lead. "I would just come and do my work. I wasn't really paying much attention to anybody. Then they started bringing up that they were having a debate for the Youth Policy Council, which is the student body of the school. I got nominated for it. At first, I didn't know anything about it. But I was like, 'Yeah, sure, I'll give it a chance,'" he said. Ramirez became a leader among his peers and joined the Youth Policy Council.

From there, Ramirez began charging the way forward on projects like reaching out to their state senator in Sacramento and even traveling to the state capitol to meet him. The work led him to the mayor's office to make his bold budget suggestion a reality.

All along, he worked to earn several important certificates, including ones for OSHA, CPR, and HAZMAT. He excitedly runs down his resume: computer skills, business skills, and community service. Most importantly, at YouthBuild, Ramirez has learned he has self-worth.

He graduated in June and is now working at an auto shop. But he has ambitions far beyond that: "At first, I didn't know what I wanted to be. Now, I don't know what I want to be because there are a lot of things I can choose."