

Engaging Juvenile Detention Officers in Mentorship Activities: A Personal Perspective as a Community Volunteer in a Juvenile Detention Center

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Abstract

This article offers a personal perspective on the role of juvenile detention officers (JDOs) in community engagement within juvenile detention centers. Drawing from my experiences as a volunteer with The VERB Kind, a mentoring organization that provides weekly programming for justice-involved youth, I reflect on how including JDOs in group discussions and activities appeared to foster trust, mutual respect, and improved facility dynamics. Though not based on formal research, these anecdotal observations suggest that when community partners invited JDOs to engage more actively, it strengthened relationships among staff and youth, enhanced rehabilitative culture, and promoted a more supportive environment. The article calls for a rethinking of staff roles in restrictive settings, with an emphasis on collaboration and connection.

When I was an undergraduate psychology and criminal justice student at The University of Alabama, I came into an opportunity to volunteer for a mentoring organization called The VERB Kind (TVK) in a juvenile detention center (JDC). TVK programming is designed to support incarcerated youth by reducing recidivism, increasing high school graduation rates, and serving as a resource in and out of JDCs (TVK, 2023). Visits center around a monthly theme and often include group discussions, interactive games, and reflection-based activities intended to aid in the social-emotional development of the youth. My role as a volunteer included helping facilitate these sessions and building relationships with the youth through consistent, supportive engagement. I was excited to get involved in the community and learn from this new experience.

As I embarked on this new adventure, I thought I had no expectations. I quickly realized I was wrong when I stepped into the facility. I was surprised by the number of middle-school-aged residents, their thoughtful participation in our activities, and their sweet, appreciative demeanor. My preconceived notions about the youth had been quietly shaping my perspective and influencing how I interpreted the environment. However, even as my understanding of the youth evolved over the next several months, my perception of the juvenile detention officers (JDOs) remained rooted in the assumptions I had about their role. They were figures of authority, their roles seemingly confined to enforcing rules and maintaining order. It did not initially occur to me or my peers that JDOs could contribute more meaningfully to the rehabilitative

mission of the facility.

In this article, I share my personal reflections on how, through my involvement with TVK, I began to rethink the role of JDOs in rehabilitation. This piece reflects my personal observations and experiences, not formal research findings. My intent is to share what I witnessed and learned in hopes that others working in juvenile justice or community engagement may find insights worth exploring in their own settings.

Biases, whether conscious or unconscious, can color every aspect of our interactions. Recognizing and dismantling these biases is an essential first step toward creating meaningful connections, particularly in restrictive settings like JDCs. For community partners working in these environments, this includes reevaluating how we perceive and interact with not only the youth but also the staff. One significant yet potentially underutilized group within these facilities is the JDOs, often viewed in roles defined solely by safety and supervision. While these roles are pivotal to maintaining the structure of the facility, JDOs can also contribute in other meaningful ways that aid in the rehabilitation of the residents. In my experience with TVK, I noticed that incorporating JDOs into structured group activities and discussion helped foster mutual respect and trust between officers and youth, which seemed to strengthen the bond between the two groups and improve facility climate, safety, and culture.

Acknowledging Biases

Initially, I viewed JDOs through a narrow lens: as security personnel who maintained order and prevented disaster. During one TVK visit, we

brought marshmallows so the youth could compete to fit the most treats in their mouths. Throughout this activity, two JDOs stood by, maintaining a watchful presence. Their passive role aligned with my initial expectations—and those expectations constrained the JDOs' potential role in my mind. However, when one of the boys tried to sing and dance with a dozen marshmallows in his mouth, the room erupted into laughter—including the JDOs, who were just as amused at the spectacle. That moment broke down a barrier for me. I began to see them not just as an authoritarian entity but as real people capable of connection.

Acknowledging this bias in my own thinking opened my eyes to the possibility of a more collaborative approach. From then on, my fellow volunteers and I made a conscious effort to include JDOs in as many discussions and activities as possible. While I can only speak from personal observation, these interactions appeared to shift the tone in the room, inviting more openness and warmth.

The Power of Humanizing Connections

Changing how we as volunteers viewed the JDOs reshaped how we interacted with them and the broader detention center environment. As we invited them into our sessions, JDOs began to participate more actively. Their presence became less intimidating to the youth, and the youth's attitudes toward them appeared to soften. Officers seemed to transition from being distant authority figures to approachable adults who could laugh, listen, and connect. Studies indicate that empathy between detention center residents and staff is vital to fostering a positive facility climate. For example, Vélez Young-Alfaro (2017) found that negative interactions with detention center staff damaged juvenile residents' mental health, whereas empathy from staff encouraged positive identity formation. These results mirror my own observations from the JDC. When JDOs took part in activities, they modeled respectful behavior and often seemed to develop a better understanding of the youth. These experiences encouraged trust and mutual respect.

Based on what I observed, youth appeared more willing to engage when JDOs participated and supported the group's efforts. These effects lingered beyond our sessions. Some of the JDOs who engaged with us continued to connect with the youth outside our weekly visits, supporting them in everyday interactions. Some JDOs started to greet us at the facility's entrance to inform us that this shift in the dynamic between them and

the youth had become noticeable even when we were not present. One JDO told us that some boys who had participated in TVK activities told some of the other boys to be respectful to the JDOs because "they're people too." The JDO joked that she was shocked because she had never been acknowledged as a human by those boys before. She attributed the change in the boys' attitude to the time she had spent listening, talking, and playing games alongside them in TVK sessions.

Another officer at the JDC, initially quiet and watchful, began to take a more active role in TVK sessions when we included him in the meetings. One night, during a session on community, he opened up to the boys about the change he had seen in them throughout their stay at the center and how proud he was of them. He implored them to choose their community wisely when they get released. He told them they are strong men who can make difficult decisions and lead others in the right direction. At the end of the night, three of the boys approached the mentors and the officer to say they felt inspired by our lesson and the officer's contribution. They told the officer they were grateful for his belief in them, and they promised they would create a community that kept them from coming back to the detention center. That officer became very well respected among the youth. One boy later told me that he didn't like that JDO until he interacted with him during a TVK meeting and discovered "he's secretly nice."

Community partners play a critical role in fostering these humanizing moments. By intentionally inviting JDOs to participate, we can help them form deeper connections with youth—relationships that may improve behavior and facility culture. From what I witnessed, this shift helped create a less adversarial and more collaborative atmosphere. When staff and youth began to see each other as individuals rather than roles, the tone of the facility became more supportive and less punitive.

Incorporating JDOs Into Rehabilitative Efforts

The potential for JDOs to support rehabilitation may be greater than we often recognize. Research supports the idea that strong staff–youth relationships are linked to better facility climate and reduced tension (Abdel-Salam et al., 2022; Logan et al., 2020). In my experience, when JDOs participated in our group activities, the tone of the sessions changed for the better, providing opportunities for officers to share their perspectives and learn from the youth.

When talking about forgiveness with the girls one evening, we invited a JDO to take the “forgiveness IQ” test alongside the youth. When she finished, she told the group her score and admitted she needed to work on forgiving herself when she makes mistakes. This sparked a profound discussion among the girls in the group about ways to move forward after failure. The officer was heavily involved in this discussion and shared her experiences and insight. At the end of the discussion, I thanked her for her contribution, and one of the girls chimed in, “Yeah, Ms. [officer’s name], I didn’t know you were cool like that!” I witnessed these types of interactions break down barriers, mitigating the effects of biases and expectations on all sides.

JDOs benefited from this shift as much as youth did. They have a very difficult job that is made even harder when residents view and treat them as the enemy. Engaging JDOs empowered them to move beyond the stereotype of being solely enforcers of discipline. While maintaining safety remained their primary responsibility, their involvement in activities positioned them as mentors and role models. As volunteers, we come and go, usually only spending a short time in the detention center each week. Therefore, it is important that the JDOs’ mentoring roles extend beyond that period so that the youth know they can turn to JDOs and learn from them even when the volunteers are long gone.

This dynamic grants JDOs a deeper sense of purpose. One JDO who took on more of a mentorship role throughout each workday said he found much more gratification at work than he had when he considered himself “just a guard.” He found a job at a different type of facility and let the boys know during one of our sessions that he would be leaving the JDC soon. He told them that he was not leaving because of them and that he was going to miss being around them. After that meeting, the JDO told us that he wanted to join TVK because he had come to enjoy working with the boys in the JDC and did not want to give it up completely.

Community partners have a critical role in redefining the narrative around JDOs and fostering a facility culture centered on collaboration rather than mere control. By actively involving officers in volunteer-led activities and mentoring sessions, we challenged our assumptions that limited JDOs’ contributions to supervisory roles. In doing so, we saw the youth benefit from the gift of JDOs’ thoughtful participation. This required intentional

effort: inviting JDOs to participate in activities, encouraging their input during planning, and acknowledging their unique insights into the youth they supervise. They are with the youth every day and can be considered the resident experts on the mentees. By supporting JDOs in developing mentorship roles, TVK helped to promote a facility climate that prioritized connection over punishment, making rehabilitation more effective for both youth and staff.

Conclusion

Improving the lives and educational conditions of systems-involved youth requires breaking down the barriers created by biases and reimaging roles within restrictive settings. This article reflects my personal observations and experiences as a community volunteer working as a mentor with TVK. I witnessed firsthand how inviting JDOs into mentoring activities seemed to influence the facility climate positively. This shift not only benefited the youth but also strengthened the community partnerships that are vital to supporting them.

While I can only speak from my perspective, I believe that when community partners make space for JDOs to engage more fully, everyone benefits. Youth are more likely to feel supported, staff are more likely to feel respected, and the environment is more likely to foster growth. By prioritizing relationships over roles and connection over control, we can begin to create more rehabilitative spaces for everyone involved. When we challenged our biases and encouraged collaboration, it opened our eyes to view the facility as an environment where all stakeholders—youth, JDC staff, and volunteers—contribute to a culture of rehabilitation and growth and a brighter facility climate for youth and staff alike.

References

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