August 14, 2014

Curtis Taylor

Loaves and Fishes Program

Good afternoon Curtis,

As our first year of the ERC Program at Youth Detention Services is drawing to a close, I just wanted to take a moment to share with you what our experience with you and the Loaves and Fishes project has meant for our young men.

As you know, the ERC Program is built around the concepts of access and change. Youth between the ages of 13-17 who have been in and out of the juvenile justice system volunteer with their families to participate in and complete our 12 week program with the goal of exposing them to so many different people, places and opportunities with different stories and ideas that something will click and steps are made onto a different path outside of crime. We have realized amazing results in our first year with only 1 of all of the youth completing our program returning back to the juvenile justice system. We know these outcomes would never be possible if it wasn’t for partnerships like yours that provide such an enriching, eye opening experience for our young people.

From the moment we arrive on our “Loaves and Fishes Saturdays” our youth are greeted with open arms treated no better and no less than everyone else. No one ever asks them about their crimes or why they are there, no conversations around their backgrounds or family histories. They are valued for their ability to work and asked to spend the day giving, contributing to helping others. They are trusted to follow directions, learn kitchen safety and procedures, use equipment, and prepare an enormous meal. From the get go it is just simply assumed that everyone will participate, work together, and get this very important task done as a team…and we always do. For some of our youth this represents the first time anyone has trusted or believed in their abilities at this level, and how meaningful when that positivity comes from strangers who have never met them before and yet still do not judge them. For some of our youth it might be the second or third time they have participated in a Loaves and Fishes Saturday, and so they are presented the opportunity to lead. Utilizing the skills and procedures from a previous Saturday, they show newer youth how to complete the necessary tasks successfully and are placed in a position of being the model of doing what is correct and good, again, a position many of our youth have rarely been placed into.

The actual service of the meal that takes place at The Salvation Army following the food preparation represents a whole other set of positive experiences for our young people. Our youth are trusted to run a food station on their own, they are repeatedly thanked for their service and greeted with smiling appreciative faces by the people they serve. They get the opportunity to experience being part of something bigger than themselves that is positive as all of the people clap and thank “the chicken man” and always remind him and his crew that this is always the best meal they eat all week and how much they look forward to it.

A day in service with you Curtis and the Loaves and Fishes project is such an amazing experience for our group and we are so grateful to have this partnership with you. The belief that you and your other volunteers have in our young people and how beautifully they are treated throughout the day of service is transformational for them. Our youth always look forward to going, and many ask if they are able to continue to volunteer once they complete the ERC Program. You are truly a blessing to us, our youth and this community. Thank you for everything you do!

Jennifer Hurley

Youth Detention Services

ERC Program Coordinator/Senior Social Worker