Chapter 9. The Role of Street Outreach in the Comprehensive Gang Model

Many different versions of street outreach have been experimented with in the United States, and many types exist today. Outreach staff within the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model play a critical role that may differ from those in other types of outreach. This chapter will discuss the role of outreach in the Model and provide guidance on administrative issues related to outreach personnel.

Role of the Outreach Worker

The role of the worker is to reach out to the target population and link the population to services available in the community and to mainstream institutions of which youth may be skeptical. The workers' specific goals are to reach out to gang-involved youth in the target area and to recruit and retain them in the project by providing access to resources, prosocial role modeling, and encouragement.

The job requires the ability to walk a fine line between the gangs and the system, specifically law enforcement. Outreach workers are not snitches, "narcs," or informants, nor are they gang members or "wannabes." The worker must understand that sometimes he is an advocate for the youth and other times a reporter of negative behavior. Outreach workers are referred to as "street" outreach workers for a reason—they work on the streets. These positions are not intended to be office-based or even institution- or school-based. While workers may go to these places to accomplish a specific task (e.g., checking up on clients, visiting, mediating), their role is to reach out to youth in their environment at community events, on street corners, in parks, in homes of youth, and in other places where youth hang out. For this reason, it is even more important to have workers who are comfortable with the population and are not uncomfortable being in these areas without the company of police or probation.

Tasks routinely performed by outreach workers include:

- Identifying youths' needs and goals to help the team develop a more comprehensive intervention plan.
- Coaching and providing role models for each youth.
- Coordinating appropriate crisis responses to project clients following episodes of violence in the community.
- Providing assistance to families in distress, ranging from accessing basic services to helping resolve family conflicts.
- Visiting clients who are incarcerated and helping to reconnect them to services when they are released from custody.
- Resolving conflicts and/or mediating between clients, their families, other youth, and/or agencies.
- Acting as a liaison between project clients and service providers/schools to facilitate client access to services.
- Working with clients who are seeking employment, from helping these youth develop résumés, to identifying their skills and qualifications, to helping them apply for jobs or work with workforce services programs.
- Conducting gang awareness presentations in schools.

As members of the Intervention Team, outreach workers provide information that helps the entire team gain a better understanding of what is going on with the target population and in the target area so that team interactions with gang members will be more informed. Outreach workers will fill in blanks for others on the team who may not be as familiar with the individuals or groups being targeted. Workers

may describe treatment needs or compounding factors (such as family violence, substance abuse, etc.) that are affecting a youth's behavior. Outreach workers also may provide information about specific crimes that have occurred or are planned. In these cases, police and probation may act appropriately, although cautiously, so that the workers are not endangered and their reputation is not jeopardized.

Although outreach workers may inform new clients that they do not want information on specific crimes and activities, some youth may offer this information. In these cases, it is imperative (and may be required by law) that the workers pass this information to law enforcement. On the other hand, police and probation should provide outreach workers with information such as identifying dangerous situations, areas, or individuals; keeping workers away from planned police activity that may be dangerous (without revealing specific intelligence, addresses, or individuals); and notifying workers of simple things such as court dates, charges, status of investigations, or information that outreach workers can use to dispel rumors about incidents and individuals. It is imperative that team members share appropriate information freely and willingly and trust one another to handle the information appropriately and confidentially.

While case load sizes have varied, it is suggested that workers be in a position to spend time in the community making contacts with unknown youth, service providers, and families; therefore, a case load of not more than 25 is recommended. Some of the youth may be incarcerated; some may not need intensive services at the time; and some may be on the run. Others may need daily in-person contact and/or phone calls or contact several times a week. The level of service provided by outreach workers is determined by team consensus for each youth.

Outreach workers interact with other team members during team meetings and each day—in person, by phone, or through other methods of communication. It is important that the workers utilize both formal and informal methods of communication and stay in contact between meetings.

While the Model relies on the Intervention Team to accomplish many of its goals, there are times when outreach workers operate individually. For example, while police and probation can conduct joint patrols and searches, outreach workers should not accompany police or probation on patrols. The youth must be able to trust the outreach workers and understand their roles as individuals and as a team. Outreach workers should be seen as staff willing to help gang-involved youth, including advocating on their behalf, ensuring they have access to services and opportunities, and acting as their link to community institutions.

While there are times when outreach and law enforcement will need to work together, the youth need to understand and believe that the outreach workers are not police officers. In addition to helping the targeted youth, team members should help each other. In some cases, police and probation have covertly backed up outreach workers who were in dangerous situations, and outreach has provided information to law enforcement regarding safety issues (advising of threats made, weapons possession, etc.) with youth in the project and others in the community. **Exhibit 9.1** on page 70 provides an outreach worker job description.

Hiring Outreach Workers

Communities should consider the following issues when hiring outreach staff. First, the outreach worker must have a thorough understanding of the community that he will serve. The best outreach workers have strong ties to the local community and existing relationships with community members. Additionally, the outreach worker must be familiar with the gang culture of the target community and have skills to work effectively with high-risk teenagers and young adults. Outreach workers need to represent the population they are trying to reach, especially in terms of ethnicity.

Second, outreach work is not a 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. desk job in a comfortable office. The majority of the outreach worker's time will be spent in the community: in homes, schools, and local agencies, and on the street, working with gang-involved clients. The outreach worker must be comfortable and willing to work in high-risk community settings at nontraditional hours.

Third, if the outreach candidate has a criminal history, law enforcement and other criminal justice partners must ensure that this individual is no longer involved in gangs, crime, or other questionable behaviors. Because of the outreach worker's role as a mentor and role model to gang-involved youth, it is important that his behavior be beyond reproach.

Outreach workers should possess the following skills:

- Maturity and good judgment.
- Ability to work independently and manage time effectively.
- Ability to interact with a variety of different agencies, including schools, law enforcement probation, religious organizations, and grassroots community agencies.
- Ability to write descriptions of client interactions for project record-keeping.
- Mediation and/or problem-solving skills.

Hiring Versus Contracting

In some communities, a local agency is already providing effective outreach services. Additionally, hiring policies of school districts, police agencies, and other criminal justice agencies may make it impossible to hire an individual with a criminal background, no matter how long ago these offenses occurred. In these instances, it may be desirable to contract for outreach services versus having the lead agency hire outreach workers. Pros and cons of each are found in **Table 1** on page 72.

If a community does contract for outreach services, it is important to verify that the type of outreach service that will be delivered by the contracting agency conforms to the Model. Further, the Steering Committee should insist on clear deliverables, including the number of clients to be served by each outreach worker, the number of contacts to occur per week with each client, a clear chain of supervision for the outreach staff, and policies and procedures that ensure that client safety, community safety, and appropriate information sharing are paramount. Community agencies that are used to having outreach workers perform case management services on their own may need training on the OJJDP Model to ensure that outreach workers are familiar with the role they will play.

The outreach workers also need to be comfortable working with law enforcement and other criminal justice agencies. If there is no relationship established between these agencies, the Project Director should be prepared to facilitate these relationships. It should be understood that the interactions between outreach and criminal justice personnel can be difficult, and it can take time to create trust and respect between these partners. The Project Director needs to play a proactive role in providing training to both outreach and criminal justice personnel on the boundaries of information-sharing and safety issues.

Exhibit 9.1
Outreach Worker Job Description

JOB TITLE: OUTREACH WORKER

BASIC FUNCTIONS

Under the supervision of the Project Director, the successful candidate will be responsible for reaching out to identified gang members and linking them to services and institutions, providing access to resources, reducing attachment of project youth to gangs and gang activities, and assisting in community mobilization in the target area. The incumbent will be a member of and participate in all Intervention Team meetings.

SUPERVISION:

Supervised by the Project Director (or a lead outreach worker, as applies).

EXAMPLES OF DUTIES:

- Identify appropriate youth to participate in the project based on target characteristics.
- Recruit and retain project youth by providing access to job skills training, information, resources, prosocial role modeling, and encouragement.
- Provide outreach services, including street, home, and institutional contacts with project youth.
- Manage a caseload of up to XX clients.
- Serve as an advocate for project youth in securing social services, education, and job-related opportunities; providing information about services; and assessing needs.
- Assess the needs of family members as related to the target youths' gang involvement, identify gang-affected siblings of target participants, and make referrals to appropriate services.
- Provide information on available services for participants' family members.
- Provide appropriate referral and follow up to ensure that target youth are aware and able to access services.
- Plan and attend social and recreational activities for the target youth.
- Maintain records of contacts with youth and write reports on status of clients.
- Identify community resources to assist in implementation of the project.
- Complete documentation paperwork as required for contacts with and services provided to target youth on a timely basis.
- Other duties as assigned.

QUALIFICATIONS:

Desired Knowledge
- Familiarity with the community.
- Knowledge of gang culture in general.
- Familiarity with the ethnic culture of the target population.
- Knowledge of local agencies' programs and services (schools, social services, law enforcement, courts/corrections), local units of government, and grassroots organizations.

Abilities

- Possess strong communication and interpersonal skills.
- Work effectively with agency staff and service providers and with gang members and their family members.
- Work a flexible schedule, including nights and weekends.
- Clearly communicate ideas in both written and verbal form.
- Understand and relate to the needs of project participants of diverse ethnic, cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Work effectively with high-risk, gang-involved populations.
- Operate a computer to enter data, maintain records, and generate reports.
- Network effectively with various types of organizations, including government agencies, law enforcement agencies, schools, social service agencies, courts/probation/corrections, and grassroots organizations.
- Work effectively with community residents, diverse population groups, and youth.
- Exercise judgment regarding appropriate information sharing, confidentiality requirements, and human relations.
- Prioritize tasks and work independently in the absence of supervision.

EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE:

Education**:** High school graduate (minimum)

Experience Preferred: At least one year in performing client-directed services in a field such as social service, grassroots organizations, community advocacy, or youth intervention.

OTHER REQUIREMENTS:

Valid driver's license and car insurance by date of hire.

Table 1		
Lead Agency	**Advantages**	**Disadvantages**
Outreach Staff Employed by Lead Agency	• Greater control and accountability over the job performance of outreach workers • Opportunities for intensive professional development	• Many lead agencies may resist hiring individuals who have a criminal history. • Outreach workers must maintain boundaries to avoid being considered police informants if the lead agency is a criminal justice entity or law enforcement agency. • Outreach workers may not have a strong connection to the community, and it may take time to develop these connections.
Outreach Staff Employed by Contracted Entity	• Often have a long-standing history working with high-risk populations in the community • May have an existing client base that can be leveraged for this project	• Steering Committee and/or lead agency may have less control over the job performance of outreach workers.

Supervising Outreach Personnel

Outreach personnel often have varying levels of professional experience. Some outreach workers may have never held professional employment; others may have a college degree and/or extensive work history. This professional or educational background is no predictor of an outreach worker's level of success in working with clients. However, if a community uses outreach workers with very little work experience, the Project Director may also wish to designate a lead outreach worker with more experience to work on professional development and administrative issues with these personnel. The Steering Committee and Project Director should also plan to do extensive training and development work with the outreach workers.

Supervision issues with communities that have implemented the Model have ranged from teaching outreach workers to manage their time wisely, to setting up reporting protocols to ensure that the outreach workers are seeing enough clients daily to meet their weekly contact goals, to documenting client contacts appropriately. Beyond these administrative issues, the Project Director, Steering Committee, and Intervention Team will also need to set policies for:

- Ensuring that both outreach workers and clients are protected during client contacts.
- Providing training on mandatory reporting situations.
- Ensuring that outreach workers know how to handle clients with mental health and substance abuse issues.
- Helping outreach workers understand the boundaries of their positions when interacting with clients and families.
- Detailing what types of personal and professional information about clients are shared, and with whom.
- Setting out safety protocols relating to gang activity in the community.

- Standards of dress when working in the community and with key partners.
- Documentation of client contacts and services provided.

Two forms are provided to assist outreach workers in managing client contact information:

Exhibit 9.2   Sample Outreach Worker Client Contact Attempt Log
Exhibit 9.3   Weekly Outreach Worker Contact Tracking Form

Exhibit 9.2
Sample Outreach Worker Client Contact Attempt Log

Client Contact Attempts			
Client Name:			
Date	Time	Method	Result
		☐ Phone ☐ In Person	
		☐ Phone ☐ In Person	
		☐ Phone ☐ In Person	
		☐ Phone ☐ In Person	
		☐ Phone ☐ In Person	
		☐ Phone ☐ In Person	
		☐ Phone ☐ In Person	
		☐ Phone ☐ In Person	
		☐ Phone ☐ In Person	

Exhibit 9.3
Weekly Outreach Worker Contact Tracking Form

Weekly Contact Log						
Outreach worker:				Week of: / /		
List contacts, by client name, for each day. Check method of contact.						
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person	Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person	Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person	Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person	Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person	Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person	Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person
Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person	Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person	Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person	Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person	Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person	Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person	Client Name: ☐ Phone ☐ In Person
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