

Holyoke Roca moves to Race St., cites positive results for many high-risk city youth

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Since enrolling in Roca Holyoke's program, Dalton Stoddard said he has begun on the road to accomplishing his life's goals. (Aprell May Munford/ The Republican)Aprell May Munford

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HOLYOKE — Dalton Stoddard grew up in Holyoke, went to jail and came home, but was struggling, he said.

That's when Holyoke's Roca outreach specialist Taj Mullins happened to reach out.

<https://www.masslive.com/westernmass/2024/10/holyoke-roca-moves-to-race-st-cites-positive-results-for-many-high-risk-city-youth.html>

For over six years, Roca Holyoke has worked with high-risk young people like Stoddard to confront the too-often repeated cycle of trauma and violence. Roca helps at-risk youth develop tools to pursue a productive future through intervention, cognitive behavioral therapy and workforce readiness training.

Roca's participants are 16- to 24-year-olds who have experienced extensive trauma and are the primary victims and/or drivers of urban violence.

"Growing up on the streets, we are not supposed to show emotions or take help, but at Roca, there are people to trust," Stoddard said.

"I stuck with it, and I have gotten really far," said Stoddard, who was implicated in a violent assault. The skills he learned in ROCA's programs helped him to get a job, his license and custody of his son.

"The community outreach helped a lot," Stoddard said. "I never could have accomplished it without Taj and Keshawn, who taught me the skills to better myself as a man."

Stoddard said he understands that coming to Roca might be difficult for some young people, "but as long as you use the skills they give you, you can make it, too," he said.

It had been a rough ride for Stoddard, Mullins said.

"But he is riding the wave, and I am proud of all he has overcome in his process and journey," he said. "Most people don't trust, but no matter what, we are there to work with them through the process."

Mullins said when meeting with Roca's participants, he helps them to talk out problems, without judgment. The relationship building helps to provide a safe and stable foundation for youth, he said.

Stoddard is not the only success story at Holyoke Roca.

During a tour Wednesday of Roca's new space on 346 Race St., its Western Massachusetts director, Solomon Baymon, shared new data from the past year that he said speaks volumes about the effects the organization has had in the city.

He said that Roca Holyoke has served 127 people, and that 96% show improved emotional regulation within 18 months of the program and 97% avoided arrest or incarceration after 24 months, Baymon said.

A statewide look at Roca clients after two years showed that 90% had no new arrests, and 98% had no new incarcerations, he said.

"Over the past six years, Roca Holyoke has become an integral part of our work to disrupt generational cycles of trauma and violence that plagues too many young people's lives in Holyoke," said Baymon.

The cognitive behavioral therapy has been instrumental in rebooting participants' emotional regulation and reducing violent arrests and new incarcerations, he said. While Roca Holyoke is a relatively new venture, its commitment to area youth is unwavering, said Baymon, who spent much of his childhood in Jarvis Heights, where his grandmother lives.

Yahaira Diaz, assistant director of Holyoke Roca, said, since the program has moved to Race Street, she has noticed more youth engagement.

The new building space is in a more accessible location, is safer and has a bigger kitchen to prepare meals. There is more space to move around, and to host circle sessions and programming.

Mayor Joshua Garcia, members of the Holyoke City Council and Holyoke Police Department also attended the tour of the new space.

Over the last two years, Roca and the HPD have been working together, said Sgt. Joseph Zurheide, spokesperson for the department.

Zurheide said he gives young people, ages 17 to 24, referrals to the program if they have been arrested for a violent offense, and its outreach workers also keep an eye out for them, to help get them off the street.

"The HPD believes in ROCA's mission. We know that every young person has the potential to succeed, and together we are building a better and brighter future for Holyoke," he said.

Zurheide said the department aims to build more connections with the community by also attending Roca's engagement circles.

"I faced many challenges in my life to get to where I am now. I found my way through a mentor at Holyoke High that really helped me out. The same is possible to everyone who comes through the doors, that's what Roca Holyoke is really offering young people," he said.

During the tour, Garcia also was recognized for being a steadfast partner and champion of Roca through its transitional employment program. Through Garcia's advocacy, Baymon said city youth have been able to access meaningful employment, which have not only provide them with income but also a sense of purpose and pride.

Garcia's vision and commitment to empower the youth has transformed lives for the better, Baymon told the crowd.

"If we are really going to change the quality-of-life issues, understanding the issues and challenges means we need to think outside the box on how we help people navigate challenges they are dealing with. We cannot let challenges make us forget who we are as human beings," Garcia said.