

**YouthZone:
A Colorado Nonprofit Organization
Practicing Positive Youth Development Strategies
In Juvenile Justice Intervention**

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YouthZone believes that youth are “at-choice” not “at-risk.” This perception, coupled with the practice of suspending judgment toward each young person that walks through the organization’s doors, sets the tone of a supportive culture that promotes positive youth development. Through individualized services, YouthZone staff help young people build resiliency by learning how to use their strengths and assets to create positive life experiences.

YouthZone is a nonprofit organization serving three counties in western Colorado. Eighty percent of YouthZone clients are referrals from the criminal justice system for juvenile diversion, deferred sentences and/or other court ordered services.

The mission of YouthZone is to provide opportunities for youth to become responsible contributing citizens and to work with families and the communities toward this end. The organization’s tag line – *Connect and Grow* – was chosen to illustrate YouthZone’s philosophy and work. The organization places high value on building relationships with young people and helping them connect to internal assets and external supports to grow into healthy young adults.

YouthZone has achieved a high level of success by breaking the traditional mold of serving youth:

<i>YouthZone</i>	<i>Traditional Perspectives</i>
Youth are at choice	Youth are at risk
Focus on strengths	Focus on deficits
Participate with youth	Do to/for youth
Empower	Enable
View youth as a resource	View youth as a recipient
Focus on the offender	Focus on the offense

In the deficit based approach to youth services:

<i>Youth is seen as</i>	<i>Youth Needs</i>
Broken	To be fixed
Sick	To be cured
Bad	To be punished
Not Capable	To be taken care of

The consequence of a deficit based approach is that youth adopt a victim mentality.

The YouthZone approach to youth services drops the deficit based perceptions and replaces them with:
Suspending judgment
Radical acceptance
No shame/blame
Youth is “naturally creative, resourceful and whole”
Focus on strengths
Curiosity
The consequence is that youth adopt a “can do” take charge of their own life mentality.

Evaluation Independent evaluation substantiates the success of the positive youth development approach as delivered by YouthZone. Evaluation results show highly statistically significant improvement by youth in the all of the areas measured:

- decreased underage drinking
- decreased use of illegal drugs and delinquency
- increased school involvement
- increased social support
- increased resiliency to sexual/emotional/physical abuse

On average, 75% of youth who have been charged with a crime and come to YouthZone for help do not re-offend (as measured over a three year period of time). From year to year, over 80% of youth successfully complete their contracts with YouthZone. A longitudinal evaluation of YouthZone results is in the beginning stages of data collection.

The YouthZone Philosophy YouthZone believes that each child should be viewed as a multifaceted, complex human being with many needs, desires, interests, and motivations. YouthZone seeks to provide an individualized comprehensive program for each youth seeking services. YouthZone believes that youth who actively participate in their community, are equipped with accurate information, and possess healthy life skills are less likely to engage in high risk behaviors including the abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

The conceptual framework for this philosophy has five critical components:

1. **Individual and Real** Youth are complex individuals with an intricate set of influences including intrapersonal skills, family, peers, culture, religion, and community. YouthZone acknowledges and supports the complexities of the youth through individualized services, which strengthen their protective factors and resiliency.
2. **Human Relationships and Connection** Research shows youth make responsible choices when they feel connected through positive human relationships with peers, family, and community. YouthZone teaches the youth to identify, engage, and link themselves to the support they need and encourages them in building

relationships. Youth comments confirm that this approach is foundational to the reason youth stay engaged in their YouthZone program.

3. **Parent/Family Involvement** Parent/guardian involvement in the youth's experience is crucial to the process. Parents/guardians are required to be an active part of the service development while the youth is working with YouthZone. Minimally, parents have face-to-face interactions with case managers during the youth's intake and exit from program services.
4. **Active Responsibility** Youth are actively engaged in the identification, implementation, and evaluation of their services. We recognize that "One Size Fits All" strategies are not effective in the long term for changing behaviors. The youth are held accountable for the implementation and completion of services.
5. **Effective, Evidence Based** Services are based on evidence based, effective strategies. YouthZone uses proven practices to support youth. Work with an independent evaluator to create a reliable and valid survey tool began in 1997. Evaluation has helped inform program development and staff development since that time.

Positive and Welcoming Environment As soon as the youth is referred to YouthZone, in most cases within minutes of meeting with the judge, a relationship is started with the youth, family and case manager. Youth and families are warmly welcomed at YouthZone. Knowing youth and families engage in the YouthZone process during heightened stress, YouthZone intentionally provides a relaxed atmosphere in the reception areas, meeting rooms, and offices. It is evident that the youth and families feel comfortable. One parent wrote that "YouthZone made a really terrible thing feel like a very positive one. They helped me relax and believe it would get better. She (the case manager) is part of the family."

The YouthZone culture of support is well known. It is not unusual to have youth and their families come to the organization to start the assessment process *before* their first appearance in court. One youth shared that their friend's mother said to "head on over there and get started getting help" when she had been arrested and summoned to court.

Response to Individual Needs Flexibility is a key to YouthZone success. Unlike traditional program interventions with little or no maneuverability with youth engaged in the court system, the elasticity that the YouthZone program provides allows staff to be in the moment with a youth's needs. This begins with the intake assessment and is reinforced with check-ins to ensure responsiveness to emergent issues. This flexible process is completed through the exit evaluation which includes shoring up supports for a youth as they transition out of YouthZone.

One example is a youth that came to YouthZone for petty theft. At the exit evaluation he showed a new risk of delinquency related to changes in the family's socio-economic status. His case manager was able to stop the exit process and offer services to the youth to address this new development in the youth's life.

Empowerment and a Positive Approach YouthZone focuses on the offender, not the offense. Programs are tailored to the youth's strengths and needs. For example, a youth that was a good artist and faced charges of theft from a store did part of his reparation by developing and displaying a poster against theft at that store and other stores in the community. The youth was a resource for resolving the problem not a recipient of "fixes."

Community Connection YouthZone understands that not only is it important to connect youth with their community, a community needs to understand how to support its "disconnected" youth. YouthZone maintains collaborative relationships with law enforcement, courts, schools, faith-based and human service agencies, businesses and local media to ensure the community knows how to best support its teens and how to connect these young people to the support available through YouthZone.

Jacyln P. Gisburne, PhD, conducted a functional analysis and replication issues study of YouthZone. Dr. Gisburne state in her report:

The youth, through YouthZone staff and culture, becomes connected to the organization and then to the community and themselves. It was an interesting dynamic, while the youth was initially referred to the organization because of detachment (disruptive, even criminal activities) he/she finds an environment that provides the safety and trust needed to reconnect. This YouthZone connection enables the youth to understand and move back into the pro-social avenues and activities, as reflected in the organization's recidivism rates, which are much lower than the national averages for youth programs.

Youth coming to YouthZone vary across a continuum of minor behavioral issues and low-level criminal involvement to major behavioral and mental health issues and multiple felony offenses. Other youth are seeking a mentor or are interested in volunteer opportunities. Regardless of the intensity of need, YouthZone employs the basic premise of positive youth development. With YouthZone support, each youth continues on a path of connection and growth that is critical for his or her individual success.