

Moving from Social Services to Social Enterprise

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Around 8,000 youth in Boston, aged 16-24, are currently disconnected from both career and educational opportunities along with 5.3 million young people nationwide. Further, 80 percent percent of low-income minority youth in MA are unemployed, and national research shows that 43 percent of women and 74 percent of men who age out of the foster care system will be incarcerated at least once in their lifetimes. These are the young adults with whom *More Than Words* has the privilege to work.

As society attempts to prepare our most vulnerable system-involved young adults for their critical transition to adulthood, we must move from traditional social service models toward more empowering, effective, and cost-effective social enterprise solutions. Too often, programs for youth who are caught in public systems focus on remediating their problems rather than treating them as part of their own solution. Young people need the "helpers" to move away from doling out services to creating hands-on, real-world opportunities to work and learn and that allow for mattering and self-transformation.

Work, in a supportive social enterprise, creates the critical context for real and measurable positive change. We do not change the lives of our youth; we provide the structure, accountability, trusting relationships and belief in their potential to allow them to do the hard work of transforming themselves.

Work Works at More Than Words

More Than Words (MTW) is a social enterprise that empowers system-involved youth to take charge of their lives by taking charge of a business. At our locations in Waltham and Boston, MA, *MTW* serves our most vulnerable youth from throughout Greater Boston who face compounding risk factors; more than 60 percent are involved with the foster care system and nearly 40 percent are court-involved.

MTW's approach to empowering young people is rooted in research, experience, and our well-developed theory of change. There are many powerful effects of work: teens with jobs are more likely to earn a diploma, avoid risky behaviors, and find employment as adults. We believe that the best preparation for the youth's future success must include an actual paid job, one which provides developmentally appropriate feedback and hands-on, real-world training for the youth to equip themselves with marketable skills and education crucial for the workplace, college, and life.

Over the past 13 years, *MTW* has grown from a few youth selling books online in a 150 square foot office to a \$4.7M operating budget and demonstrated model that works for youth to achieve measurable outcomes in education, work, and life. Youth earn a job running book businesses - they are out on a fleet of trucks sourcing books and selling them in their online, retail, wholesale, and pop-up shop businesses, generating more than \$2M in earned revenue while developing critical skills approximately 20 hours/week. They also have a second job -- their "YOU" job -- where they receive intensive case management to work towards personal goals. Two years of continued support in the Graduate program help youth transition to other jobs and persist in education.

This model works. Youth graduate from *MTW* and have gained the skills and self-efficacy to take charge of their lives. 80 percent of *MTW* graduates spend at least 30 hours/week productively moving their lives forward with work and/or school.

Understanding the Key Levers

MTW describes itself as a holistic ***work-based, social enterprise, youth development program***. Each piece of this description is important -- we do not want to be, and should not be, pigeon-holed as just one of these things. Each component is critical to our model, theory of change, and impact for our youth.

How do the key levers work?:

- **Real revenue and real jobs:** Our youth-run business is serious and sophisticated; this is not a side component with “make-work” activities. Youth source more than 2.4M book donations annually, ship out 500-600 orders every day, list 22,000 books into our online inventory each month, and generate more than \$2M in earned revenue annually, representing 45 percent of our operating budget. The authenticity of the job skills, revenue, and business needs are key to youth empowerment -- that they are critical to the success of the business and *MTW*. In addition, youth are paid to do the really hard work on their “YOU Job” advancing their education plans and mapping concrete steps for their future education, work, and life. Youth are consistently impressed that at *MTW*, they are paid to work on both the business and their lives. At *MTW*, our youth are not passive recipients but part of their own solution, and therefore offer incredible leverage to the philanthropic and public dollars that support our program.
- **Compassionate accountability:** Our youth need and deserve an opportunity to be accountable, to have real responsibility, to be part of something, to shine, and to realize their true potential, creativity, intellect, professionalism. and power. They need to see they are smart and can do things educated and successful people do. *MTW* provides high

expectations and a willingness among adults to hold up a mirror to them, "go there" and have the tough conversation every single time to help them learn how to be accountable for high-bar expectations. It is not uncommon for youth at *MTW* to receive suspensions, or even to lose their spot in the business and be supported to earn it back.

- **Long-haul commitment:** *MTW* is accountable for sticking with our youth and providing ongoing support for a minimum of two years to ensure youth persist in achieving measurable outcomes. Unlike many programs which direct youth to a particular career path or education goal, *MTW* supports youth to direct their own futures. During their time in the core Social Enterprise, youth are exposed to a wide range of career choices and paths. Youth attend site visits with established partner employers and post-secondary options and our Education and Employment Managers work with youth to map action plans for furthering their education and securing employment.
- **Fanatical focus on Continuous Improvement with Data:** *MTW* engaged a national expert, David Hunter, to facilitate a comprehensive Theory of Change process in 2007 and an implementation assessment in 2014 to confirm our model and identify areas to strengthen. We have an Evaluation Advisory Council of experts to support our ongoing analysis of our evaluation systems, model and impact. *MTW* uses

Efforts To Outcomes (ETO) to analyze the data we collect, and we have a director of Evaluation devoted to supporting and deepening our use of data to continuously increase our effectiveness. *MTW* engages youth in collecting data every day about their performance on the job and progress moving toward personal goals. Youth and staff use this data in performance reviews for promotions, to map plans, and to promote high expectations and clear accountability. *MTW* is unique in how fanatical it is about data, learning and in how deeply our youth are engaged in understanding their own outcomes data.

Scale and Impact

MTW is undertaking a game-changing expansion that will propel us to the next level -- growing our Boston site into an innovative two-floor hub of social enterprise, allowing us to empower 60 percent more youth, increase earned revenue by 75 percent, pilot new enterprises to provide new skill building opportunities for youth, and launch a training institute to inform the field.

Through our current expansion project, we will expand our current online and retail operations and test and learn with new enterprises including a youth-run event space and social enterprise marketplace. We are also committed to growing the impact and sustainability of the social enterprise field by developing a training institute. We have piloted training that provides Continuing Education Units

(CEUs) for social workers and youth development professionals and are mapping growth of this department to offer a menu of training opportunities to share our model.

Summary- The Moral Imperative for Models like More Than Words

Our society and social sector are still biased about what our youth can do, especially those who have grown up in our public systems of care. It is time to shift the field and lift up more empowering and effective models that allow the world to see our youth in action, running a legitimate business, hosting events, demonstrating their professionalism and power, and achieving measurable outcomes for their education, work and life. We are committed to growing our model, our impact and our training institute to ensure that more people working directly with and investing in youth are shifting their own perceptions and belief systems. We are committed to helping to create waves of adults who walk out of *MTW* and into their respective roles with a new understanding of how to approach this work and create positive shifts in how society interacts with our most vulnerable youth and how leaders design systems to support them.

Works Cited

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