

Proposal Narrative

Portsmouth, Virginia is a beautiful, historic city in the heart of Hampton Roads. With arguably the most ideal location of all of its neighboring cities, Portsmouth boasts stunning waterfront views, large international ports and an ever present military anchor that drives the economy even during hard economic times. Unfortunately, these attributes are often overshadowed by public perception. Portsmouth's somewhat negative image is more than just a public relations problem, but rather is largely due to the fact that it has one of Virginia's highest crime rates per capital while having one of its lowest high school graduation rate. Couple those dubious statistics with exceptionally high rates of poverty, illiteracy, and single-parent homes, and the public sentiments toward Portsmouth begin to seem understandable. Therefore, in order to regain Portsmouth's reputation as one of Virginia's great cities, our community must ask what are the root causes of these statistics and how can we improve them.

Both of these questions are important to be answered together. Often times however, in situations like this, only the latter question is addressed. Too often the result is cities trying to solve the crime problem by providing more funding to the police department or solve the graduation rate problem by providing more funding to the school board. Certainly the intent is good and sometimes the results are deciphered to show some improvement in the targeted statistics. However, unless the cause is understood, the problem cannot be addressed efficiently, resulting in little actual improvement.

Operation Restore Dreams believes strongly that each of the aforementioned negative “statistics” Portsmouth possesses share a common “root cause” – many children in Portsmouth are not being reared properly, and when these children grow to become adults, they too often become contributors to the negative statistics. More alarming still, when these children reach adolescence, they often have children of their own, effectively creating a cycle that has continued to persist for too many years – a cycle that will not be broken until the root cause is addressed. The mission of Operation Restore Dreams is to directly address this root cause.

For decades, research has emphasized the importance of the first five years of a child’s life on the development of their brain. We know that if a child is not given an environment rich with love and external stimulation for each of the senses, that child’s brain will not develop to its potential – and, currently, this “damage” is irreversible. Too many of the children in Portsmouth do not have safe, loving environments where their development is adequately stimulated. It is alarming that the root cause of some of Portsmouth’s most pressing problems is not being addressed due to an absolute void of resources to provide such an environment to the most at-risk children.

Operation Restore Dreams will attempt to accomplish its mission by providing a positive, rich environment starting during the mother’s pregnancy and continuing until the child “graduates” at age 5. During the program’s first year, the goal is to admit 20 pregnant mother’s from Portsmouth. The mothers will be referred to us from Portsmouth Family Medicine (a division of EVMS Health Services), the Portsmouth Health Department, the Portsmouth Public Schools, and other organizations such as Maryview Medical Center. A screening process has been developed that will allow the program to choose the most at-risk mothers based on criteria such as income level, presence of a father, and strength of family and community support. This screening process will also lessen the potential for mothers with drug addictions or other issues that would require more intensive therapy from being admitted to the program, as the program will not be in a position to adequately address those needs.

Once initial contact with the mother is made, the primary objective will be to build a relationship with her based on trust and mutual respect. The role of the mother is still critical; therefore time will be spent on the mothers to enable them to “dream” with their children – for their children. In fact, a syllabus specifically for the mothers has been created. The syllabus will help guide the women as they become mothers capable of rearing their children independently. Consequently, a large part of their training will be “hands-on,” supervised childcare with their babies. To maintain incentive for their participation, Operation Restore Dreams will be paying the mothers a reduced salary with pay levels proportional to their commitment level and performance. A detailed qualitative and quantitative evaluation process has been developed to track the mothers’ progress and to determine which pay level they are in.

Once the babies are born, the next phase will begin. A syllabus has been developed for the babies and the mothers that will provide stimulation in a loving environment. The syllabus emphasizes stimulation in each of the five senses while the children are encouraged to explore their surroundings. The environment will be multi-cultural and will include instruction in both English and Spanish. Detailed, rigorous qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the children will be recorded to track the results of the program and to aid in modifying the syllabus in an effort to achieve maximum effectiveness.

In addition to the steps outlined above, an informal partnership with Portsmouth Family Medicine has been established. The partnership will allow Portsmouth Family Medicine to continue providing the same services they provided through the program, Centering Pregnancy – except, under the umbrella of Operation Restore Dreams. They will provide a resource for connecting pregnant women with our organization, teach classes to help improve the health of both the mother and the baby, and provide pre-natal and well-being exams. The convenience of Portsmouth Family Medicine being located two floors above Operation Restore Dreams is also an asset in the event a mother or child becomes ill.

For the first year, the staff will consist of an Executive Director who will also serve as the Child Education Director, a Parent Education Director, and two qualified childcare/administrative assistants. In addition, a minimum of three mothers will be present at all times during the day, receiving training and participating in the education of the children. The Executive Director has a Bachelor of Science degree in Early Childhood Education, and has valuable experience working in similar programs in Colombia, South America. She is also fluent in both English and Spanish, is the author of the childcare curriculum and is a co-founder of the organization. The Parent Education Director has a Master of Science degree in Experimental Psychology. The two assistants have experience in childcare and have the loving, compassionate, patient demeanor compatible with Operation Restore Dreams’ mission. The President of the organization is a former U.S. Navy Officer, graduate of the U.S. Navy Test Pilot School who flew the F-14D Tomcat operationally, has two Master of Science degrees in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering, and currently is President and CEO of a Portsmouth-based business. He is also a co-founder of the organization.

The current location of the program is 600 Crawford Street, Suite 200, Portsmouth, Virginia. The property is owned by the founders of Operation Restore Dreams and the space is being donated. However, since an office is not an ideal location for a childcare organization, Operation Restore Dreams plans to eventually seek an alternate location more suitable to its needs.

In addition to providing the building, the President of Operation Restore Dreams is also donating his time. Also, the Executive Director is donating a significant portion of her salary. She will only

be compensated at the same level as she is currently being compensated by the Chesapeake Public Schools Department as a part-time LEP tutor – or approximately \$18,000 per year.

Nonetheless, in order to be fully funded, Operation Restore Dreams will need an additional \$140,000 for the first year. This money will pay for the remaining staff's salaries, and all equipment and supplies for one year.

The strategy of Operation Restore Dreams is to add 20 pregnant mothers per year. Although Operation Restore Dreams is a program for children of ages 0-5, at least initially, the program will only include the babies that were born to mothers who were already part of the program during their pregnancy. This strategy will allow the program to grow slowly since the first year will only have newborn babies, the second year will only have newborn babies and 1 year olds, etc. In addition, this strategy will allow pure statistical analysis. If the program were to admit a child at the age of 2, for example, the performance of that child could be misleading when trying to assess the success of the program.

Of course, with this strategy, the amount of funding required would increase each year. However, due primarily to overhead in the form of staff salaries, the highest cost per child comes during the first year – \$9,000 per child. Nonetheless, the estimated cost for year two currently is \$320,000 or \$8,000 per child. Although, this may seem like a large amount of money, research done by the State of Virginia Department of Education shows that this money spent would be a very wise investment. Specifically, the Department of Education has found that money invested in Early Childhood Education programs produces an absolutely stunning return of 8:1.

Regardless of probable success rates, raising this large amount of money in subsequent years will be a challenge. However, Operation Restore Dreams is confident the strategy of slow growth will result in the ability to acquire supporting data during the less expensive beginning year, which will open more doors to local, state and federal grants.

The main hurdle has always been to open peoples' eyes to the importance of the first years of a child's life, and more importantly, that a program can be developed to adequately impact a child's brain development. Research has shown that the more common, less expensive programs that consist of short-term classes and/or home-visits for mothers are resoundingly ineffective. The same research shows that for a program to be successful, it needs to literally walk hand-in-hand with the mothers during the entire critical period of a child's first five years. This is what Operation Restore Dreams aims to do. If given the opportunity, the possibilities are endless – both for the program and the children who will have participated in the program.