

## About the United Teen Equality Center (UTEC)



**Mission:** *UTEC's promise is to ignite and nurture the ambition of Lowell's most disconnected young people to trade violence and poverty for social and economic success.*

**UTEC's Peacemaking to Policymaking Model:** The United Teen Equality Center (UTEC), founded in 1999, was the result of an organizing movement driven by young people to develop their own teen center in response to gang violence. Today, UTEC's nationally recognized model begins with intensive street outreach and gang peacemaking, reaching out to the most disconnected youth by meeting them "where they're at" and facilitating a peace process between rival gang leaders. Each young person in our target population receives at least three years of intensive case management. UTEC engages youth in workforce development programming that blends transitional employment with social enterprises in food services, maintenance, and construction. We provide alternative education through GED preparation and our Alternative Diploma Program. Values of social justice and civic engagement are embedded in all programming, with special emphasis on our youth-led organizing and policymaking work, both locally and statewide. Ultimately, UTEC's unique model can provide a pathway from the street to the State House for older youth most often overlooked and considered disengaged.

**Location:** Lowell, MA

**Website:** [www.utec-lowell.org](http://www.utec-lowell.org)

**Founded:** 1999

**Annual Budget:** \$2.5 million

### Geography & People Served

UTEC serves approximately 1,000 young people each year through street outreach, intensive programming, enrichment activities, and community events. In our 2012-2013 program year, we expect to serve at least 150 target youth in our more intensive, full-time core programs. Our target youth are ages 16-24, have dropped out of school, and are homeless, gang-involved, court-involved, or pregnant/a parent.

### Social Context and Community Needs

- Lowell, the 5<sup>th</sup> largest city in Massachusetts, is home to about 13,600 young people ages 15 to 24.
- Lowell Police estimate that 1,500-2000 youth are gang-involved, and there are 25-30 active gang sets in the City.
- Lowell High School's (with a population of over 3,500 students) four-year graduation rate ranks in the bottom 10 percent of all high schools in the state.
- Lowell's poverty and unemployment rates are consistently above state averages.

### Selected Accomplishments

- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Community Health Leader award and honored with the Citizens Bank and NECN *Champion in Action* award.
- The Social Innovation Forum named UTEC a Social Innovator in the area of Creating Opportunities for Disadvantaged Youth (2007).
- Won the Innovation Award for Nonprofits from the Small Business Association of New England (2011).
- Testified by invitation of the late Senator Ted Kennedy at the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on gang violence prevention.
- Teens Leading the Way, a statewide, youth-led coalition for policymaking (for which UTEC is the lead agency) won the Young Civic Leaders Advocacy Award at the MassVote Civics (2011).



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### Johns Hopkins University's Evaluation of UTEC's Streetworker Program:

- 18-month evaluation funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and conducted by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.
- 55% of youth met all or most of their goals with the help of a Streetworker. 90% made significant progress.
- Evaluators found positive impacts of the Streetworker Program on youth, violence, and the larger Lowell community.
- UTEC's Streetworker Program found to be worthy of national replication as a model for reducing violence.
- Peer-reviewed results were published in *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action* (fall 2010). Additional articles under review for 2012 publication.

## **THE UTEC MODEL:**

UTEC's commitment to each young person in our target population is a minimum of a three-year relationship and clear impacts in our 5 key outcome areas: Improved Housing Stability, Increased Educational Attainment and Post-Secondary Readiness, Increased Employability and Financial Health, Ceased Criminal and Gang Activity, and Increased Civic Engagement. To achieve these outcomes, UTEC's integrated model is managed through 5 integrated program centers:

***Streetworker/Gang Peacemaking:*** Our model begins by meeting young people "where they're at" through intensive street outreach, specifically targeting those young people who are most disengaged and deeply involved in local youth gang networks. This recruitment and relationship-building work sets the stage for Streetworkers to conduct our gang peacemaking work. Steps in the peacemaking process include

1. Identifying and engaging the gang "shot callers" (gang set leaders);
2. Inviting members of the same gang to a peace circle for an initial agreement to move forward with the peace process;
3. Taking youth on a peace trip to create trust and help staff understand pressing issues with rival gangs;
4. Inviting rival gang members to a peace summit, held outside of Lowell where gang leaders are able to learn about one another and sign a peace contract.

***Case Management:*** Once a Streetworker develops a relationship with a targeted young person (out-of-school and gang-involved, criminally-involved, and/or homeless), he/she will refer them to a Transitional Coach (TC), UTEC's name for case managers. Youth develop a service plan with a TC and work on major life challenges/obstacles (i.e. housing, finances, family relations, physical/emotional health, and legal matters). Youth then enter either our Education or Workforce Development programs. TCs have a caseload of 20 youth and meet one-on-one with each youth on at least a weekly basis. TCs also track youth's progress toward long-term outcomes after they leave UTEC for two years.

***Workforce Development:*** Our tiered transitional employment model provides high-risk youth with both valuable job skills and real earnings to help them pursue positive life choices. Knowing that the youth we work with have a number of life challenges to surmount, we offer them multiple chances to excel through our tiered program. Our program is very much design to build in the concept of relapse. A young person who doesn't meet expectations may have to start over at the first step of our transitional employment model, but no young person is ever kicked out. As they progress through three program tiers, participants develop healthy life skills, job readiness (soft) skills, industry specific (hard) skills and financial literacy skills that prepare them for professional and personal pursuits beyond UTEC. Youth work 20 hours per week in industry-specific social enterprises in culinary arts, construction, and maintenance, fulfilling real-world service contracts.

***Education:*** GED classes are offered 3 days a week, and youth who are enrolled in the workforce development (WFD) program must attend the GED program. A separate GED class is provided for youth who desire the GED, but do not participate in the WFD program. All classes are focused on project-based learning and the curriculum integrates the values of civic engagement and social justice. UTEC has also partnered with Lowell High School (LHS) to also offer an Alternative Diploma Program (ADP) whereby previously out-of-school youth can attain their high school diploma. This unique school combines self-paced class work with community action work and internship placements. Graduating students receive a Lowell High School diploma.

***Civic Engagement/Organizing:*** Youth who participate in the WFD and Education programming are exposed to the principles of social justice and community organizing, learning the skills that will allow them to address the problems and inequities that they see in their communities. Locally, the heart of our organizing work focuses on the coordination of the City Council Candidate Forums once every two years. Youth involved in this planning process utilize the forum as a means to conduct a needs assessment, eventually serving as a launching ground for a future issues-based campaign. Statewide, UTEC coordinates a coalition of youth organizations called Teens Leading the Way (representing Springfield, Worcester, Haverhill, Lowell, Everett, and Boston/Cambridge). Currently, the coalition is advancing their Civics Campaign, focused on gaining approval for a new civics class to be a high school graduation requirement.

Concurrently, ***enrichment programming*** is offered to all youth (those who are in school as well as out of school) throughout the year from Monday through Thursday afternoons. Cultural arts programs range from breakdancing to capoeira, and sports activities include basketball and weight training. UTEC also features a Young Women's Program that engages in a variety of activities, including our curriculum for teen pregnancy prevention and sexual health.