

Leveraging Community Partnerships to Strengthen Juvenile Justice Programming: Lessons from Live Rite Structured Recovery Corporation

Prepared for:
Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Michigan Committee on Juvenile Justice
Lansing, MI

www.michigan.gov/mdhhs

Prepared by:
Altarum Institute
Novi, MI

www.altarum.org

Executive Summary

As part of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Title II Evaluation led by Altarum, this qualitative study examined how Live Rite Structured Recovery Corporation (Live Rite) develops and leverages partnerships with community organizations and providers to support implementation of its Pre-Arrest Jail Diversion initiative. The study draws on four semi-structured interviews with five participants—including community partners, program staff, and program leadership—as well as a review of program documentation. The purpose of the study was to better understand how partnerships are established, how they support program implementation, and what lessons may inform partnership development in juvenile justice programming.

At Live Rite, community partnerships extend well beyond referral relationships. Participants described partners as helping connect youth and families to mentoring, behavioral health services, educational opportunities, enrichment activities, and other supports that broaden the program's ability to respond to individual needs. Interviews also highlighted the intentional work required to build these relationships. Participants consistently emphasized sustained community outreach, trust, shared commitment to youth, reciprocity, and ongoing communication as factors that contributed to strong, lasting partnerships.

The interviews also identified challenges that influence partnership development and collaboration. Transportation barriers, staffing and funding capacity, scheduling constraints, information-sharing limitations, and community perceptions of recovery-oriented organizations affected how relationships were established and maintained. Participants described addressing many of these challenges through continued outreach, community visibility, flexibility, and regular engagement with partners, allowing relationships to grow and evolve over time.

The experiences shared across interviews suggest that successful partnerships require intentional investment and ongoing coordination. Live Rite's approach demonstrates how partnerships can expand organizational capacity, strengthen connections across youth-serving systems, and increase access to services that support youth and families. These findings provide practical insights for juvenile justice programs seeking to build and sustain community partnerships as part of diversion programming.

Background

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) Title II Evaluation is led by Altarum in support of juvenile justice programs funded through the Michigan Committee on Juvenile Justice (MCJJ). The evaluation provides technical assistance while examining program implementation, emerging outcomes, and implementation practices that may inform juvenile justice prevention and diversion efforts across Michigan.

Live Rite Structured Recovery Corporation (Live Rite) is a community-based organization located in Roseville, Michigan. Through a Title II grant awarded by MDHHS through the MCJJ, the organization is implementing a Pre-Arrest Jail Diversion initiative for youth ages 10–17 in Macomb County who are at risk of entering the juvenile justice system. The program is designed to intervene early, connecting youth and families to individualized case management, mentoring, behavioral health and family supports, educational assistance, workforce readiness activities, and other services intended to address the underlying factors that contribute to justice involvement. Youth may be referred by schools, law enforcement, courts, behavioral health providers, or family members.

The program's implementation strategy includes developing partnerships with organizations that serve or interact with youth and families. Early planning included community outreach, relationship-building, partner training, and collaboration with schools, law enforcement, courts, behavioral health providers, and community organizations to support referrals, service coordination, and overall successful program implementation. This study builds on that implementation approach by examining how partnerships developed in practice, the roles they played in supporting the program, and the factors participants identified as contributing to successful collaboration.

Methodology

This qualitative study examined how Live Rite develops and leverages community partnerships to support implementation of its Pre-Arrest Jail Diversion initiative. The study explored how partnerships were initiated, the roles they played in program implementation, the factors that supported ongoing collaboration, and the challenges participants encountered in developing and maintaining these relationships. The analysis was intended to identify practices and lessons that may inform partnership development in juvenile justice diversion programs across other counties and organizations in Michigan.

Interviews

Altarum conducted four semi-structured interviews with a total of five participants between May and July 2026. Participants included two community partners, two Live Rite staff members who participated in a joint interview, and the Program Director. Interview questions explored pathways to involvement, partner roles and contributions, communication and collaboration processes, barriers to partnership development, and recommendations for strengthening partnerships.

Exhibit 1: Interview Participation

Participant group	Interviews	Participants	Modality
Community partners	2	2	Virtual interviews
Program staff (joint interview)	1	2	In-person interview
Program Director	1	1	Virtual interview

Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using a structured qualitative coding process. The research team developed a codebook focused on partnership development, collaboration and communication, partner contributions, implementation challenges, service capacity, and opportunities for improvement. Transcripts were coded and analyzed to identify recurring patterns across participant groups. Findings were also compared with information documented in the program application, site profile, implementation planning materials, and logic model to provide additional context for interpreting the interview data.

Limitations

This analysis reflects the perspectives of five participants connected to a single juvenile diversion program and was not designed to establish causal relationships or evaluate program effectiveness. Youth, families, and representatives from referral agencies were not interviewed as part of this study. Findings should therefore be interpreted as a qualitative examination of one program's approach to partnership development as part of program implementation rather than as evidence of best practices applicable to all juvenile justice settings. To protect participant confidentiality, interviewees are identified by role. Quotations have been edited minimally for readability; ellipses indicate omitted text, and brackets indicate words added or modified for clarity.

Findings

Interviews with Live Rite staff, community partners, and program leadership described partnerships as supporting multiple aspects of program implementation. Participants explained how relationships were established through sustained community outreach, expanded the services and opportunities available to youth and families, and evolved through ongoing communication, trust, and reciprocal engagement. They also identified organizational and community conditions that influenced how partnerships were developed, maintained, and adapted over time.

Partnership development depends on intentional outreach and community visibility.

Across interviews, participants described partnership development as an active and sustained process. Live Rite staff participate in Chamber of Commerce meetings, community events, presentations, information fairs, and other networking opportunities to introduce the organization and learn about potential collaborators. Staff follow initial contacts with additional outreach and

invitations to visit the program. This sequence allows prospective partners to observe the program's environment, services, and philosophy before being asked to make referrals or assume a formal role.

A longstanding program partner recalled that Live Rite was not initially well known or readily accepted by local institutions. Over time, outreach staff, open houses, and repeated engagement with police, hospitals, courts, and other stakeholders increased familiarity with the organization. The partner described a gradual change from difficulty gaining access to organizations actively seeking Live Rite's involvement.

> *"Don't just walk away. Keep knocking on the door. … If they say no to [one opportunity], get them into the tour and let them see what you're doing … in person."*
>
> ***— Program Director***

School outreach illustrates the time required for some relationships to develop. Staff reported initial difficulties with engaging school contacts that often required repeated outreach by phone and email. Presentations and site tours created opportunities for school representatives to see the program directly and ask questions. One recent tour was described as creating a potential pathway for increased referrals and school-based involvement as an alternative to suspension, although the arrangement had not yet been finalized.

These examples suggest that partnership development was built through repeated opportunities for organizations to become familiar with Live Rite's services and approach. Rather than relying on a single interaction, participants described relationship-building as an ongoing process that often-preceded referrals and broader collaboration.

As relationships developed, participants emphasized that not every potential collaboration became an ongoing partnership. Continued involvement depended on whether prospective partners shared Live Rite's approach to working with youth and demonstrated a willingness to collaborate.

Mission alignment and a shared youth-centered approach determine partnership fit.

Participants consistently emphasized that the number of partnerships was less important than the fit between Live Rite and a prospective collaborator. According to participants, prospective partnerships were evaluated based on a genuine commitment to youth, an understanding of the population being served, and a willingness to work collaboratively. The Program Director identified shared philosophy as particularly important, including a willingness to work alongside youth, avoid shaming or overly punitive approaches, and adapt when an activity or strategy was not effective.

> *"I'm looking for someone that says, 'Hey, I have an idea. Let's see what we can do here.'"*
>
> ***— Program Director***

This emphasis on fit influenced decisions to decline or discontinue relationships when a partner's approach conflicted with the program's youth-centered philosophy. Conversely, individuals who contributed ideas, listened to staff, and remained flexible were more likely to assume continuing roles. Participants frequently used passion and commitment as indicators of fit, while also acknowledging that compensation, contracts, or memoranda of understanding may be appropriate depending on the service and organizational context. Although formal agreements were described as useful for clarifying payment, deliverables, and grant requirements, particularly for contracted services or larger organizations, they were not described as sufficient evidence of a strong partnership. Trust, shared goals, reliable follow-through, and a compatible approach to working with youth were viewed as more central to sustaining the day-to-day partnership.

Once partnerships were established, participants described partners assuming a variety of complementary roles that expanded the services, expertise, and opportunities available through the program.

Partnerships function as program infrastructure by expanding program capacity.

Live Rite's partners contribute to the program in multiple ways. Courts, schools, behavioral health providers, and law enforcement can identify and refer youth. Other partners provide specialized expertise, including counseling, martial arts and de-escalation instruction, trauma-informed yoga, nutrition education, healthy relationship programming, career guidance, and alternative education options. Community businesses and organizations may also contribute supplies, activities, or experiences that enrich pro-social programming without working directly with participants.

These contributions allow Live Rite to address a wider range of youth and family needs without developing every service internally. Staff described using partners to connect youth with education options, career exploration, behavioral health support, and activities that increase engagement. In this way, partners extend program capacity while Live Rite staff retain responsibility for the relationship-based support and coordination that connect individual services.

> *"We educated him on addiction. He educated us on the mental health. … It was a two-way partnership."*
>
> ***— Program Director***

Partner roles also changed over time. One partner initially offered occasional self-defense classes and later became involved in regular mentoring and skill-building activities. Another relationship began through an earlier behavioral health initiative and expanded into counseling, staff development, family support, and consultation as new programs emerged. These examples demonstrate how a defined initial activity can provide a basis for partner engagement and support identification of additional areas for contribution.

Reciprocity supported this expansion. Staff described asking potential partners what Live Rite could contribute to their work. As a result, Live Rite supported sharing information and outreach opportunities, and providing presentations or resources to schools and other organizations. Partners, in turn, contributed specialized expertise, expanded opportunities for youth, and connections to

additional community resources. Participants therefore described effective partnerships as reciprocal relationships rather than one-directional referral arrangements.

As partnerships became more integrated into program operations, participants emphasized that maintaining these relationships required ongoing communication, transparency, and flexibility as responsibilities evolved.

Communication and flexibility strengthen ongoing partnerships.

Participants described partnership maintenance as an ongoing process. Live Rite uses recurring meetings with referral and service partners, open houses, tours, and informal check-ins to review expectations and understand how services are functioning. The frequency of contact varies by partner role; interviews referenced monthly coordination with some court and program partners and more frequent meetings for individuals directly involved in youth programming. Transparency, including opportunities to observe activities and ask questions, was also described as reinforcing confidence in the relationship.

One external mentor described positive relationships with Live Rite staff while also identifying a need for more opportunities for mentors to plan together, discuss upcoming content, and share information relevant to supporting youth. This perspective suggests that informal communication may be sufficient when a partnership begins, but more structured coordination becomes important as partners are integrated into regular programming.

> *"Maybe we could work towards having more meetings amongst all of the mentors. … Figuring out some way for the mentors to all communicate more often [about] … what is the lesson?"*
>
> ***— Program Community Partner***

Flexibility was closely connected to sustainability. Partners and staff described adjusting lessons based on youth interest, modifying activities for different age groups, responding to emerging behavioral health needs, and revising roles as program needs changed. Partnerships remained useful when participants could revisit expectations and adapt their contributions while continuing to work toward shared goals.

Although participants described many examples of successful collaboration, they also identified organizational and community conditions that influenced how consistently partnerships could be developed and maintained.

Operational and community conditions shape partnership implementation.

The interviews identified several conditions that can limit collaboration and program reach. Transportation and scheduling influence whether youth can participate in partner-led activities. Staff time and stable funding affect Live Rite's ability to identify partners, coordinate contributions, prepare programming, and maintain consistent relationships. Participants also described schools that expressed interest in referrals while remaining hesitant to share information or engage more deeply, which can limit access to educational outcome data.

Community perceptions also influence outreach. Participants noted that stigma associated with recovery services or nonprofit organizations can create initial hesitation among prospective partners. Presentations, tours, and direct relationships were described as ways to address these perceptions by making the program's youth services and operating approach more visible.

Partnerships can mitigate some constraints by contributing transportation resources, alternative education, donated activities, specialized services, or introductions to institutional decision-makers. However, the interviews also indicate that partnerships do not replace adequate program infrastructure. Effective collaboration continues to depend on staffing, funding, clear confidentiality practices, appropriate data-sharing parameters, and sufficient time for coordination.

Implications for Leveraging Partnerships

While these findings reflect the experiences of a single juvenile diversion program, they identify several considerations that may inform partnership development in similar settings. Participants described partnerships as relationships that require intentional development, ongoing communication, and continued investment to support program implementation. The following implications are drawn from the qualitative findings.

Invest in partnership development as an ongoing process.

Participants described successful partnerships as developing through repeated outreach, relationship-building, and opportunities for organizations to become familiar with the program over time. Community engagement activities, participation in local networks, presentations, and site visits helped establish credibility and create opportunities for collaboration. Programs seeking to strengthen partnerships may benefit from recognizing that meaningful relationships often develop gradually rather than through a single meeting or formal agreement.

Prioritize mission alignment when establishing partnerships.

The findings suggest that effective partnerships depend on more than organizational affiliation or formal agreements. Participants emphasized the importance of identifying collaborators who shared a youth-centered philosophy, demonstrated flexibility, and were willing to work alongside staff to address participant needs. Considering mission alignment early in the partnership development process may help establish stronger working relationships and support long-term collaboration.

Leverage partnerships to complement program services.

Participants described partners contributing specialized expertise, community resources, educational opportunities, behavioral health services, mentoring, and enrichment activities that expanded the supports available to youth and families. Rather than duplicating existing services, partnerships allowed Live Rite to connect participants with organizations and individuals who complemented the program's relationship-based approach. Similar programs may benefit from identifying partners whose expertise fills gaps in available services while allowing program staff to maintain responsibility for coordination and participant support.

Maintain partnerships through ongoing communication and reciprocal engagement.

Participants described communication as an ongoing process that extended beyond initial partnership development. Regular check-ins, opportunities to observe program activities, transparency, and flexibility helped sustain relationships as program needs evolved. Participants also emphasized reciprocity, describing partnerships as relationships in which both organizations contributed resources, knowledge, or opportunities. Creating opportunities for ongoing communication and mutual benefit may help strengthen collaboration over time.

Recognize that partnerships operate within broader organizational and community conditions.

Although partnerships expanded available services and opportunities, participants also identified staffing, transportation, funding, scheduling, confidentiality requirements, and community perceptions as factors that influenced implementation. These findings suggest that partnerships can strengthen program delivery but do not eliminate the operational resources required to coordinate services and support program implementation.

Conclusion

This qualitative study examined how Live Rite Structured Recovery Corporation develops and leverages community partnerships to support implementation of its Pre-Arrest Jail Diversion initiative. Across interviews, participants described partnerships as extending beyond referral relationships to support service coordination, specialized programming, and access to resources for youth and families. Partnership development was characterized as an ongoing process shaped by relationship building, shared values, communication, and reciprocal contributions.

The findings also illustrate that successful partnerships require continued investment. Participants described organizational and community conditions—including staffing, funding, transportation, scheduling, and community perceptions—that influenced how partnerships were established and sustained. While collaboration expanded the program's ability to connect youth and families with a broader range of supports, participants emphasized that effective partnerships depended on ongoing coordination and dedicated effort.

Although these findings reflect the experiences of a single juvenile diversion program, they provide insight into how community partnerships can support implementation and expand access to services within diversion programming. The experiences described by participants may inform future efforts to develop, strengthen, and sustain collaborative partnerships in juvenile justice settings.