As we began 2017, we challenged ourselves to address the needs of our African American male youth. We are dedicated to helping youth and young men overcome the statistics that say they face disproportionately high rates of suspension, expulsion, and drop-out from high school, have a greater likelihood to go to prison than college, live in female dominated families, father children they will not live with or parent, and are more likely to be subject to, if not die from, hand-gun violence.

Too many youth are growing up in impoverished communities that lead them to see crime as a means to obtain the normal necessities of life. Often this "survival of the fittest" reality leads them to cycle in and out of the criminal justice system and ignore the mental illnesses suffered from traumatic experiences due to those conditions. While violent crime is down, auto theft arrests for African American youth in Pinellas County have jumped 227 percent in just two years. It is our task to answer the cry for help amongst our African American youth in St. Petersburg and be dedicated to serve our community.

Under St. Petersburg’s My Brother’s & Sister’s Keeper initiative umbrella, the inaugural Cohort of Champions (COC) is a youth training program that offers wraparound support by way of educational, entrepreneurial, workforce, and enrichment training opportunities for young African American males. The Cohort of Champions has partnered with the Arts Conservatory for Teens, St. Petersburg College, and the Pinellas Ex-Offender Re-Entry Coalition to serve this population.

As we reach the mid-year mark for the inaugural Cohort of Champions Initiative, we are delighted to provide a program update. The COC Training Initiative is a key step in preparing these young men for the future, and developing a trained, qualified and ready workforce.
Cohort of Champions: Our Progress

Our mission is to create opportunities through innovative approaches that strengthen and build ladders to help put African American boys and men on a path to success. The Cohort has 73 active participants between the ages 12 to 24 who are receiving paid training courses, wrap-around services for their families, entrepreneurship training, afterschool employment training, athletic team building and more. The Cohort is growing daily and always accepting new members.

The mechanism by which the City of St. Petersburg will achieve its mission is a program called Crossroads. Crossroads is a City initiative that creates positive intersections for young boys and men as they mature. The program provides positive role models, academic enrichment, and job readiness skills.

Here are the highlights from the first Cohort of Champions class:

CAREER READINESS TRAINING

The COC provides Career Readiness Training courses that target youth out of school. The goal of Career Readiness Training is to help students acquire one of the following: high school diploma, GED, or basic certification for being placed in employment. Courses are four to six weeks long.

The St. Petersburg College PITCH Program (Persistence, Incorporated into College Hired) helped two of the COC members earn a certificate in Supply Chain Management. SPC’s PITCH Program also took a group of COC members on several job placement tours to Valpak, Tampa International Airport, P.F. Chang’s and Knight Enterprises and other businesses. The PITCH program offers guidance to the Cohort members on how to position themselves for a better future. The program offers personal development workshops that help with resume building, personal branding, web presence, interview, and job fair preparation.

From STARS Participant: Christopher L. Lampley, Jr. (Class 002)

“I applied to the STARS program to get a better grasp on life and job placement. The STARS management and staff are committed to helping us learn to help ourselves.

I had doubts, complaints, and misunderstandings. I felt the program was going to be a waste of my time, because I already had a very high level of knowledge of what to expect in the real world of work. However, since I have been in the STARS program, I have learned to take responsibility for my life’s direction, and to be self-reliant, motivated, open-minded, purpose-driven and observant. The program also revealed to me the ethics, manners and values of the mainstream world of work. STARS also introduced me to the hard skills and soft skills that employers have identified as critical to getting into the career of my choice.

One of my favorite quotes that STARS introduced me to is ‘The 3 C’s of Life:’ ‘You must make a Choice to take a Chance or your life will never Change.’

So, I fully got a better awareness of the program and how it helped me to better myself. STARS equipped me with the tools and skills that will help me make better choices to live a better life. STARS and the Cohort of Champions helped me learn that ‘I am capable, and I am strong. If I believe in myself, I can turn my dreams into a plan, and my plan into my reality.’ I now have a plan to get somewhere in life, to ensure that I do right and to the best of my abilities.”

From Cohort Participant: Kashif Haynes, age 13, Ninth Grader

Kashif is an aspiring veterinarian. He started an internship at Pet Pal Vet Clinic and Animal Shelter. He has attended 90 percent of the weekly meetings. He always seeks opportunities to support and serve others. Before attending the Cohort, his mother was having a difficult time with his attitude and behavior. Since attending, he has become more stable and responsive to his mother and is demonstrating leadership abilities and qualities.

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From Cohort Participant: Darius Bailey, age 16, 11th Grader

“The Cohort of Champions program has given me a lot. I haven’t gotten anything material – only things for self-improvement. The Cohort also made me realize my life goal of being a CEO of a technology corporation. Most of all, the Cohort of Champions gave me motivation. The Cohort benefited me by helping me realize what I must do in life. It made me help around the house more and made me respect my mother more.”

From Darius’ Cohort mentor:

“Darius has attended 90 percent of the weekly meetings. He always seeks opportunities to support and serve others. Weekly, he shares with staff how he is implementing the Cohort teachings into his life.”
In the COC, we do not turn away youth who have made mistakes that may have landed them in trouble. We also embrace youth who have not made mistakes, but whose life circumstances have prevented them from graduating high school or earning a GED. We provide those members with the opportunity to further their education by acquiring a technical certification or college degree in a supportive environment. Our goal is to help these members complete workplace certifications and enroll in post-secondary institutions.

Through the Pinellas Ex-Offender Re-Entry Coalition (PERC), the STARS program offers employment training, job placement assistance, and two years of continuing support to any Cohort member who requires this type of assistance. The STARS program graduated three Cohort members and one of those graduates received job placement hours before completing the STARS program. The COC celebrated their first graduation dressed in the finest threads, donated by Sacino’s Formalwear.

**MENTORING ROUND-UP**

Through Mentoring Round-Up programs, the COC provides fun and safe monthly outings directly supported by a group of 100 Black Men in the community that have an interest in helping the Cohort members succeed. Outings include: bowling, movies, fishing, sports games, go-kart racing, art and history tours, and suit shopping.

The COC also participates in community service events around the city.

The COC helped with “Scrubbin’ Da Burg 2017,” a one day, citywide clean-up for St. Petersburg Parks and Recreation Center summer participants. Mayor Rick Kriseman gave the proclamation for the event. The event attracted 800 teens who went to parks all over St. Petersburg and made each area a cleaner place. During Scrubbin’ Da Burg, the COC had the pleasure of helping Midtown Academy get ready for the upcoming school year.

**WRAP-AROUND SERVICES**

Not only is the City dedicated to serving our youth, but we are dedicated to serving their families. By offering wrap-around services to the entire family, the COC’s goal is to help families advance and place them on track to increase their median household income. Wrap-around services may include helping them start a small business, or offering opportunities for family members to acquire certifications and employment training.

Through ACT (The Arts Conservatory for Teens), the COC has participated in a monthly family bonding dinner, where the youth and parents make a mutual commitment to success and recap the workshops they’ve been involved in that month. ACT also offers workshops that share useful parenting tips and help the youth better communicate with their parents during their monthly bonding dinner.

The COC and their families receive comprehensive support services provided through Pinellas Ex-Offender Re-Entry Coalition (PERC) and all Cohort members are eligible for emergency assistance and certification scholarships through current programs of the Pinellas County Urban League. Individuals that need more comprehensive services are provided access to mental health and trauma counseling, utilizing the Wrap-Around Services Model.

**ENTREPRENEURSHIP TRAINING**

The Cohort members participated in entrepreneurship training allowing them to explore their entrepreneurial interest. The training focused on teaching the Cohort members how to have an entrepreneurial mindset, along with discussions about personal branding, acquiring the proper business license, and developing a business plan.

Through PERC, the Cohort has enrolled in the Icehouse, an innovative and interactive program that teaches students how to turn opportunities into a business and how to empower yourself to succeed. After successful graduation from the program, the youth will be eligible for a grant to help fund their business idea.
The COC had four members successfully graduate from the Icehouse program and all graduates indicated that they would like to start a business. The Arts Conservatory for Teens (ACT) lead an entrepreneurial training for the COC called BOSS – Building Opportunities to Self-Sufficiency. BOSS exposed the COC to mentoring events and internships, which allowed them to see deeper into careers they’ve always wondered about.

Through ACT, the COC had the opportunity each week to listen to a professional or business owner speak about their career and ask questions. Some of the professionals that came out to speak to the Cohort were Kevin Carr, CEO of PRO2CEO; Theodore Andrew with Wells Fargo Bank; and Sergeant Tavarus Lucas of the United States Army. Kashif Haynes, an aspiring veterinarian started an internship at Pet Pal Vet Clinic and Animal Shelter.

11th Grader Darius Bailey, 16, stated, “The Cohort of Champions program has given me a lot. I haven’t gotten anything material – only things for self-improvement. The Cohort also made me realize my life goal of being a CEO of a technology corporation.”

AFTER SCHOOL EMPLOYMENT TRAINING

The COC offers employment training to all Cohort members after school. The COC utilizes a character development curriculum with structured employment shadowing to help cohort members achieve better behavioral outcomes in their everyday lives. The goal of the afterschool employment training is to help Cohort members raise their GPA and complete basic certifications that lead to part-time employment, while they’re finishing school.

ATHLETIC TEAM BUILDING

Through athletic team exercises, the COC participates in weekly sports that expose young men to healthy activities like tennis, golf, yoga, swimming, cross-fit, and more familiar activities like basketball and football. Not only are the COC exposed to new sports, but they also learn how to focus on healthy eating and cooking.