

The Benefits of Starting a ChalleNGe Program in Pennsylvania
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My name is Allyson Solomon and I'm the President of the National Guard Youth Foundation, the national nonprofit organization that supports the 37 National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Programs located in 27 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia.

I cannot speak on behalf of the National Guard or the National Guard Bureau, but I am here to speak on behalf of an organization that has worked with the programs and thousands of its graduates for sixteen years.

ChalleNGe, as many of you already know, is a program for youth in those states who have left school without graduating or have been unable to complete school due to circumstances beyond their control but have the desire to change the trajectory of their life. ChalleNGe is one of the few programs that gives them this opportunity.

In 1989, a man by the name of Hugh Price presented a concept to the National Guard Bureau with the help of Dan Donohue, a National Guard Bureau public affairs officer who had become familiar with Mr. Price's design for a program to help out-of-school youth. Mr. Price, who had grown up in Washington, DC, was struck when he saw a few of his fellow high school classmates several years later. These were the classmates who were notorious for being the troublemakers but they had grown into respectable and successful men. Mr. Price took note of the fact that they all had entered the military.

As a scholar who was interested in effective, developmentally-oriented approaches for youth, Mr. Price began to examine the aspects of military training and its ability to reach, teach and develop young people who are "rudderless". Thus, he developed the concept for the Youth ChalleNGe Program, or ChalleNGe Corps as it was known in the early '90s, a quasi-military residential program that provides youth who have left early with a safe and secure structured environment that encourages academic and personal growth.

At ChalleNGe, these teenagers are not allowed to bring cell phones; they don't have access to Facebook, or Instagram or any other form of social media; they are there to focus on themselves without outside distractions.

These are kids in your neighborhood who had started hanging around the "wrong crowd" and had made mistakes; these are kids who were bored at school and decided to cause trouble; these are kids who were not succeeding in the traditional school setting, and while they made the decisions leading up to dropping out or being kicked out of school they have realized they made mistakes and want an opportunity to turn their lives around.

We often hear from parents, grandparents and guardians who've noticed the significant changes they've seen in their loved one who has gone through ChalleNGe. Last year we received a letter from a mother of a cadet. She described her son as a good child who lost his way some time after middle school. One poor decision led to another, and after he turned 18 he realized he would have another year or more of high school left in order to graduate. He felt overwhelmed, despaired and he gave up on himself. A

trusted teacher mentioned he should pursue the ChalleNGe academy in his state and he decided to apply.

After the five-and-a-half month residential phase, this young man applied to college and was accepted. Two years later and he's still working full-time and going to college.

Another young man entered ChalleNGe because he didn't have anywhere else to turn for help. His mother was incarcerated and his father was never really involved in his life. He looked to the streets for male role models, and made some poor decisions along the way. He stopped going to school and worked multiple jobs to pay rent and bills. A family member attended ChalleNGe and he decided to follow in his footsteps to better himself so he could support his family financially. While at ChalleNGe, it became obvious to staff that he had great musical talent. He was able to spend time developing his musical talent and the staff encouraged this development. He graduated from ChalleNGe with credits and was able to return to school to earn a high school diploma. He has since been offered a contract by a major recording artist for song writing. He owns his own home, is married and working in a job he enjoys.

These individuals are adamant that this single decision – the decision to go to ChalleNGe – was the decision that changed the outcome of their lives. There are thousands of stories like this. But we not only have stories to support the effectiveness of the program, independent studies have been conducted on the program as well that prove it works and is cost-effective.

In 2011, MDRC – a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization based in New York – released results of a multi-year evaluation conducted on ChalleNGe utilizing a random assignment research design found that, after three years, participants were 29 percent more likely than their control group counterparts to have obtained a GED or high school diploma, were 86 percent more likely to have earned some college credits and much more likely to be working. Their earnings are also 20 percent higher.

Building upon this research, we – at the National Guard Youth Foundation – commissioned the RAND Corporation to conduct a cost-benefit evaluation of ChalleNGe. RAND found, that for every dollar expended on ChalleNGe, the benefits to society are \$2.66; a 166 percent return on investment.

There have been over 140,000 young men and women who have graduated from ChalleNGe since 1993, moving on to continued education, the military or the workforce. ChalleNGe has served teenagers from all walks of life and from diverse race and ethnic backgrounds. It works, but is by no means a silver bullet. ChalleNGe does not work for every 16-18 year-old who has dropped out of school but it is overwhelmingly effective for those who've left school early and desire the chance to turn things around so they can become productive members of society.

The National Guard Youth Foundation is proud to support the 37 ChalleNGe programs and the more than 10,000 who graduate every year.

We focus on four “buckets”:

- The first is **Awareness** - so that more are aware of the effectiveness of this program
- The second is **Advocacy** - for growth so that more young men and women who need this program have access to it

Then we also focus on providing support after the program, so that these young men and women have a complete net of support.

- We help pave the way to continued **Education** – not just about a high school diploma or GED, but also technical training, access to college credits and continued education
- And, finally, we focus on **Employment** – we need to help these young men and women find gainful and meaningful employment.

Ultimately, we need these young men and women to get to a place where they are able to support themselves, and eventually others, and be the best version of themselves they can be. They are the future of our communities, the future of our nation, and because of this program, thousands every year are getting an opportunity to build within themselves a foundation that will help them navigate the future challenges they may face and find firmer footing for life.

In closing, I just want to say that I served in the Maryland National Guard for three decades and I became familiar with ChalleNGe ever since Maryland opened its Freestate ChalleNGe Academy in 1993. I've seen young men and women who've gone into the program and who've graduated – and some even served in my unit. This program is the turning point in their lives. It's the fork in the road between continuing a path of despair and a path of hope and opportunity. It was never a question to me why the National Guard was involved in a program like this – the best way to ensure our communities are safe and flourishing is to invest in our youth and to give them every opportunity to experience success like those of us sitting in here today.