

BREAK IT TO MAKE IT: SUMMARY OF PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

January 2017 - June 2018



Funded by

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

with the assistance of

Assemblymember Mike Gipson

BREAK IT TO MAKE IT

A collaboration of **The Strindberg Laboratory, Los Angeles Mission, and Los Angeles City College**, Break It to Make It (BITMI) is designed to help formerly incarcerated individuals successfully reintegrate into their communities and achieve long-term self-sufficiency through the arts, rehabilitative services, and higher education.

The Strindberg Laboratory creates original theater productions featuring incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. They have offered accredited theater classes in California State Prisons since 2016 and in the jails and on Skid Row since 2013. Their “Jails to Jobs” prepares people who participated in their correctional programming to teach community theater workshops.

Los Angeles Mission is a faith-based organization providing help, hope and opportunity to those in need since 1936. Services include shelter, food, clothing, and long-term residential rehabilitation services.

Los Angeles City College is the oldest community college in Los Angeles, providing basic skills, career, and transfer-focused education to a student population that is mostly low-income & first-generation students of color.

The partnership follows a holistic model that includes both corrections- and community-based programming to address the complex challenges facing formerly incarcerated individuals when integrating back to their communities, including: homelessness, low education levels, limited employment experience, employer stigma, substance abuse, and mental health issues.

The \$600,000 funding for partnership activities was obtained with the leadership of State Assemblymember Mike Gipson and was distributed to the participating agencies through a contract with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Activities taking place within the prisons and jails:

- Institutes served through this grant included: California Rehabilitation Center – Norco, California Institute for Men – Chino, California State Prison, Los Angeles County – Lancaster, Peter J. Pitchess Detention Center – Castaic, Century Regional Detention Facility – Lynwood, and Men’s Central Jail – Los Angeles.
- Strindberg trainers offered 122 theater workshops in jails and 104 in prisons through this program serving a total of more than 1750 participants (duplicated attendance).
- Two full-semester theater classes were taught by Strindberg artists in prisons, resulting in the original shows, “Fathers and Sons” and “California Dreaming,” which were performed in front of more than 500 inmates and guests. Students received two college credits for these classes through LACC.
- Eleven cognitive behavioral workshops were given in prisons to promote positive mindsets and behaviors
- Strindberg, LACC, and LA Mission staff attended resource fairs at the prisons to share information about the program to inmates approaching their release date.
- LA Mission staff, using guidance and screening provided by Five Keys Charter School, interviewed 530 inmates to discuss the program and determine their eligibility for BITMI upon release.

Activities taking place once inmates were released:

- LA Mission provided comprehensive case management to its clients, beginning with the essential needs of food, housing, and clothing, and continuing with substance abuse and mental health counseling, legal assistance, life skills, spiritual support, GED courses, financial literacy, and job placement. Programs lasted from 3 months to 12 months, depending on the need of the individual.
- The Strindberg Laboratory conducted two for-credit theater classes and cognitive behavioral workshops for Mission students, resulting in two original shows, “Free Yo’ Mind” (September 2017) and “The Destiny is the Journey” (June 2018).
- The LACC Counselor spent two afternoons per week at the Mission to provide a 3-credit counseling class and individual academic counseling sessions.
- The LACC Peer Mentor visited the Mission weekly and hosted an informal discussion session focused on the value of education with Mission residents.
- At LACC, participants had access to their own counselor, who provided them with academic and personal support, an educational plan, and book vouchers (amounting to as much as \$300 per semester).
- BITMI students at LACC met twice monthly to listen to speakers from college program and local universities, for updates about deadlines and important college events, and to plan activities, including a visit to UCLA.
- The LACC Counselor and Peer Mentor visited local re-entry and sober living homes to identify formerly incarcerated individuals interested in college courses.

A two-day ***Freedom Festival*** was held at LACC on September 28 and 29, 2017 to highlight the role of the arts and education in helping to reintegrate formerly incarcerated people back into society. The festival also raised awareness of the need for basic human rights, social justice and equality, and stigmas associated with incarceration.

Community, arts, and educational organizations participating in the Freedom Festival included:

- Friends Outside
- Five Keys Charter Schools
- Homeboy Industries
- The Francisco Homes
- TheatreWorkers Project
- Playwrights Project
- CSUSB Prison Arts Collective

More than 600 students, community members, and LA Mission residents attended one or more Freedom Festival events. One highlights of the Festival was the performance of “Free Yo Mind” by the LA Mission theater class students, which was inspired by Martin Luther King’s “What is Your Life’s Blueprint?” speech and attracted more than 300 audience members. Another inspiring moment was a march around campus by Festival participants with a 100-foot banner painted by LACC students depicting their ideas of freedom.

A video with images from the Freedom Festival is available at: <https://vimeo.com/250708023>

Program Outcomes:

In total, more than 1750 inmates (duplicated attendance) attended at least one theater workshop or class conducted by The Strindberg Laboratory during the 18-month grant. Through the program, 107 current and former inmates received two college credits for successfully completing a theater class. 95% of those surveyed in the jails said that they learned to better work with others, express themselves, and use relaxation techniques. 82% of the prison participants expressed beneficial results from taking the classes.

The two theater productions in prisons were presented to more than 500 inmates, families, and outside guests of the performers. Inmates who watched the shows were surveyed. Results showed that 90% of them enjoyed the shows and almost two-thirds of them (64%) expressed an interest in taking some form of arts education after seeing the shows.

At the Mission, Strindberg artists worked with former inmates to create two new productions, both of which were performed in LACC's theaters. Audience members for "Free Yo' Mind" at the Freedom Festival reported that they had learned something of value by attending the performance (97%) and 90% would recommend the play to others.

LA Mission staff talked with more than 530 inmates about BITMI and accepted 36 men for the program, 26 of whom accessed services at the Mission. A number of the men interviewed are still in custody and may access services from the Mission or LACC in the future.

The 26 participants at the LA Mission followed different paths through the BITMI program, including the formal "Fast Track" program, which provided a full-time schedule of activities. A typical day in the Fast Track program included: Group Dynamics or 12-Step Program, Bible Study, GED Prep or Reading Comprehension (if needed), one-on-one counseling, physical education, and an LACC class or job assignment.

More than 115 former inmates became part of the BITMI cohort at LACC, either directly from the jails or prisons, from LA Mission, or from local reentry and sober living houses. They received counseling, book vouchers (up to \$300 per person), and opportunities to visit universities and to hear from college and community speakers.

Of the BITMI group, 95 of them received a grade in at least one community college course in the district, during or before the period of the grant. Eighteen of the participants had taken courses in the district prior to the start of the BITMI program.

The most popular courses taken by BITMI students in 2017 and 2018 were in the disciplines of Psychology (72), English (65), Math (59), Theater (55), Cinema (22), and Counseling/College Success (21). The emphasis on general education courses reflects students' academic goals of attaining a degree and/or transferring.

For the courses completed during the grant period, the overall average GPA of the students was 2.83.

Plans moving forward:

- Continue to build partnerships with similarly-focused community organizations, including the Midnight Mission and local reentry and sober living homes in LA, that serve formerly incarcerated individuals.
- Build on the success of the theater classes by exploring additional creative courses, such as music, art, or creative writing, to offer in the jails and at the Mission to give students a means of experiencing college classes that are inspiring and allow them to succeed in an academic context.
- Seek additional funding to cover continuing expenses, including the assignment of a dedicated college counselor to serve this population at the college and at the Mission, book vouchers for students, instructor costs for classes in prisons and at the Mission, and transportation vouchers between the Mission and the College.