

# A Faith-Based Social Capital Approach for Those in Drug and Alcohol Recovery



CASE STUDY

## TEEN CHALLENGE ARIZONA

### About Teen Challenge Arizona

*Teen Challenge Arizona (TCAZ) is a faith-based nonprofit organization with a strong focus on relationships with five residential drug and alcohol recovery centers in Arizona: three centers for men ages 18 and over, one for adolescent girls ages 12–17, and one for women ages 18 and older (including women with children). In addition to the residential recovery centers, TCAZ offers prevention programs and does outreach to schools, churches, and communities. TCAZ’s adult men’s residential programs are at least 13 months long, its adult women’s program at least 12 months, and its adolescent girls’ program at least 3 months. The organization also offers nonresidential programs, including crisis centers, ministry training institutes, and outreach and referral services.*

*TCAZ—started in 1965—is part of the national Adult & Teen Challenge (ATC) USA network, which has 256 faith-based drug and alcohol recovery centers throughout the United States. ATC is rooted in Pastor David Wilkerson’s outreach that started in 1958 to boys in street gangs in New York City. The curriculum for residential programs both in Arizona and nationally includes Bible-based courses, individual study, personal mentoring, work ethic training, and involvement in the Christian community.*

### Program Overview

TCAZ is focused on faith-based, substance use recovery residential centers for adults and teens. Its faith-based approach leverages relationships with others going through similar experiences to build and leverage participants’ social capital. For example, many program graduates later join TCAZ as interns, and about 35 percent enter full-time ministry (including as TCAZ staff). Nationally, about 50 percent of ATC staff members are program graduates.

The program also engages students in activities—spiritual and secular—that emphasize embracing causes bigger than the individual in order to help them build and leverage social ties to others in their religious and broader community. For example, TCAZ uses thrift stores and volunteer work opportunities to build social capital by involving its students in physical work while also encouraging them to form stronger connections to their faith, to the community, and to each other.



This case study is part of a project on “Strengthening Human Services through Social Capital” that aims to offer insight on programs that use social capital to reduce poverty, increase employment and economic self-sufficiency, and improve child and family well-being. For more resources, visit <https://aspe.hhs.gov/social-capital>.



## Social Capital: Components in Practice and Innovative Approaches

ATC staff explain that they believe the relationship with God is central to their work in all of ATC's locations, and they note that this spiritual relationship underpins other kinds of relationships formed through the program. As one interviewee stated, "We are a ministry... We want to be right out in front letting people know that God can change their life... The whole reason for changing and seeking transformation is not temporal but eternal value." With spiritual relationship at the core of its work, ATC embraces multiple types of social capital but most strongly emphasizes connections with people who are similar (bonding social capital).

**Bonding: Connections with People Like Me.** Connecting students with others going through similar experiences is a strong thrust of TCAZ and ATC. Students in residential centers are placed in a cohort with fellow students also struggling with substance use, resulting in a team-based approach to resetting their lives. An important way that TCAZ establishes bonds among its students is through daily or weekly "self-evaluations," in which students and staff convene to discuss recent incidents and to explore the personal issues that underlie them. "No one is allowed to preach, instruct, or make a point" in a self-evaluation; instead, open questioning from staff and fellow students alike prompts self-exploration into entrenched negative behaviors. This process "helps students and staff get to the heart of the issue of why certain things are going on," said a former student, now a staff member. Evaluations are mostly voluntary, and one person self-evaluates at a time, allowing for deep focus on and care for each individual. This approach results in significant trust among students and staff alike, given their shared experiences.

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**— former participant**

Bonding social capital is further emphasized when students from TCAZ's adult men's program spend the last 7 months of their program at a ranch with other students from around the state, widening their group of peers to about 60. "The Ranch" brings together men across Arizona who have acclimated to the TCAZ program and "who are a little more mature, so the questions [during the self-evaluations] get more challenging, but it helps you grow," said one participant. Students also focus on exercise, studies, and volunteer work, providing a setting "to focus on your mind, your body, and taking care of yourself," said an interviewee. These encounters foster deep connections with people who have similar experiences with both substance use and self-evaluations.

### **Bridging: Connections with People Different from Me.**

Students build networks with others who have different backgrounds in two main ways. First, the program accepts students of all backgrounds, diversifying the student and staff population and building connections between people of varying religions, races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic levels. Second, the program makes sure students are active in the community, thus exposing them to people with different backgrounds. For example, TCAZ participants provide logistical support for community events such as 5K races, Christian concerts, and spring training for professional baseball; students also support fire crews during wildfires.

**Linking: Connections with People in Positions of Power in the Community.** ATC leadership noted that, although not every ATC site across the country does this well, "Some centers do build key relationships with potential employers and job placement organizations... Some centers have direct relationships with corporations where, upon graduation, students get a leg up in the interview process." TCAZ, for example, actively links with local businesses, including catering and construction companies, and students build social capital by volunteering or working for these companies, building job skills, connections, and employment track records.

## Key Outcomes

ATC and TCAZ consider "decisions for Christ" and baptisms to be among their key outcomes, along with program completions. In 2018, ATC reported having 11,392 students, 8,576 decisions for Christ, 3,317 water baptisms, 2,365 spirit baptisms, and 2,703 program completions.

ATC has been the subject of two external evaluations. The most recent evaluation was a 1999 Northwestern dissertation<sup>1</sup> using participant surveys conducted at program entry and after program graduation for 59 ATC clients and a comparison group found that,

<sup>1</sup> [https://teenchallengeusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/NW\\_study.pdf](https://teenchallengeusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/NW_study.pdf)

compared with participants in short-term inpatient programs, “Far more Teen Challenge graduates were employed full time... [and] far fewer... had returned to treatment.” It also found that the program “appeared to be especially successful for... those who registered low on measures of social connectedness prior to the program.” Moving forward, Evangel University, an accredited liberal arts university in Springfield, MO, has been contracted to conduct a success rate study that will measure the overall success of the program.

## Lessons Learned and Key Considerations for Social Capital Integration

TCAZ and ATC staff and students discussed five key considerations that have helped its programs succeed.

**Embrace Community Connections from the Spiritual Component of Social Capital.** TCAZ’s faith-based approach to social capital and to drug and alcohol recovery permeates the program and enables it to readily connect with churches locally and nationally, bringing two types of benefits. First, as graduates leave the program and relocate to rebuild their lives, TCAZ identifies churches to help them build connections in their new communities. Second, church connections help ATC identify and reach more people in need, because churches often do not have services to address the drug epidemic. TCAZ, for example, visits churches around Arizona regularly to “spread the word that they are available for people [in their congregations] and solicit financial support to sustain their programs.”

**Establish Community Relationships before Creating a New Program.** National ATC leadership requires a 2-year start-up period for new programs, because they want staff of each program to take the time to get involved in the community, build community relationships with churches and other leaders, and acquire a foundation of grants and other resources. At the end of 2 years, “They’ve established a strong foundational base, [so] that once they’ve launched, programs can be sustained much more effectively.” ATC headquarters staff has learned that building this foundation of community partnerships and relationships “sooner rather than later” is very important to long-term success.

**Celebrate Success with the Community.** When students graduate from the program, all ATC sites, including TCAZ, strive to create a community celebration to acknowledge their accomplishment. Recently, one local ATC adolescent program had more than 500 community members attend its graduation. Graduation ceremonies are highly memorable to mark these moments in time for the students and community members alike, creating a stronger joint sense of purpose, commitment, and accomplishment.

**Develop Deep Connections with Businesses and Other Secular Community Leaders.** ATC has learned to seek out leaders of secular businesses for both financial support and advice on how to operate the program sustainably. TCAZ works diligently to have a very strong board with a good balance of people who both believe in the work and offer a mix of skills, talents, and abilities important to the program. For example, their board includes clinical counselors, lawyers, accountants, and CEOs whose networks and expertise help ensure that the program is managed well.

**Call on Peers as Particularly Effective Staff Members.** TCAZ encourages many graduates to consider an internship with the organization, which sometimes leads to a full-time staff position. Multiple interviewees commented that students find it easier to relate to, connect with, and be given hope by staff and interns who have gone through what they are going through. Leadership development training of interns and staff strengthens management and supervisory skills, which they can use at ATC or with other employers.

One leader summarized what makes ATC work this way: “One of our greatest strengths is our relationship with Christ. We’re a body. We’re in the trenches together. Another one of our greatest strengths is the social capital piece. You do life with people, care about them, sacrifice for them.”

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**— an ATC leader**