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Mentoring Center's popular director takes new position in D.C.

By Cecily Burt, STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — David Muhammad, the charismatic director and public face of The Mentoring Center in Oakland who used his own life experiences — and mistakes — to earn the trust of troubled teens and get them back on track, has left the nonprofit organization for a job heading the juvenile probation department in Washington, D.C. "We're heartbroken, he's such a treasure," said Andrea Youngdahl, director of Oakland's Department of Human Services who worked closely with Muhammad as coordinator of the city's various anti-violence initiatives.

The Mentoring Center holds a \$163,738 contract with the city to oversee the youth component of the Project Choice program, an anti-violence initiative that works with inmates in San Quentin State Prison and the California Youth Authority before and after they are released to help them gain the skills and attitude to integrate successfully into society.

The Mentoring Center is also the lead agency that administers \$691,214 worth of contracts for Pathways to Change, a program that pairs repeat offenders with mentors, services and role models to help them stay out of trouble.

"David is a very unique individual, somebody who has life experience with some of the issues facing these youth," Youngdahl said. "He's very smart, and he is committed to policy reform ... he sees the big picture and the small, one week running a group at (the California Youth Authority) in Stockton, and next week in Washington in policy discussions."

Youngdahl said she was confident the organization, headed by interim director Muntu Mbonisi, will continue to operate as efficiently as before and has no worries about the transition.

Some Richmond community members were not so sanguine. They said the city signed a \$185,000 contract with the nonprofit organization to develop its Office of Violence Prevention, based largely on their confidence in Muhammad.

Like Oakland, Richmond is plagued by a soaring homicide rate. The consultants at The Mentoring Center were hired to establish an administrative structure for the new city agency, which in turn will organize Richmond's disparate violence prevention efforts to leverage grants and reduce redundancy.

Muhammad said he understands that some community members were initially upset with his departure. But he said he has every confidence in the consulting team, which includes Oakland school board member Gregory Hodge and DeVonne Boggan, director of Oakland's Safe Passages, a health and safety program that works with vulnerable youth. Boggan previously served as The Mentoring Center's executive director. Muhammad also said he plans to return once a month to meet with the city and the community.

City Manager Bill Lindsey also defended the contract and said the team was impressive even

without Muhammad.

Muhammad started his new job two weeks ago. For someone who has spent years trying to change the system from the outside, being on the other side of the fence is a big change, he said.

"It's significant, as someone who spent years advocating for reform of the system, it's crazy, I'm now the system," he said. "But the very reason I took it is to do some reforms."

He said at first he wasn't interested in leaving his "dream job" at The Mentoring Center, even though he had always expected to play a larger role in shaping national policy.

But Vincent Schiraldi, director of the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services for the District of Columbia, knew who he wanted, and Muhammad finally seized the opportunity to create a model for juvenile rehabilitation that could be emulated around the country.

As chief of Committed Services, he is in charge of 620 youth up to age 21 who are either incarcerated in the Oak Hill Youth Center, in other residential treatment programs or on "after-care status," the equivalent of youth parole in California.

"It's good, it's a lot of work and it's challenging," he said this week. "I went from managing a staff of 22 and a

\$2 million budget to a staff of 300 and a \$35 million budget, so my responsibilities increased somewhat."

Muhammad said he doesn't intend to forget that the face-to-face connection is crucial to winning young minds. And he has not forgotten the path he might have taken had he not received a helping hand from the Omega Boys Club in San Francisco. He remembers it every time he walks into juvenile hall to teach a writing class to inmates because he was once there himself.

"I haven't even seen a young person in two weeks, but once I get acclimated I'll go into the (Oak Hill) facility myself," he said.