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**Collaborative Approach to
Juvenile Justice Reform**

*Key Characteristics of Juvenile Justice Related
Services in Allegheny County*

by Jeffery Fraser

JUVENILE JUSTICE RELATED SERVICES (JJRS)

was created in Allegheny County to help make sure youths with behavioral health issues who are involved with the juvenile justice system are identified early and receive the appropriate treatment, case management and other services necessary to improve their outcomes and enable them to successfully live in their communities without reoffending.

Over the past decade, JJRS has made significant contributions toward the county achieving those goals. Human Services Administration Organization (HSAO), a private agency specializing in juvenile behavioral health, administers JJRS for the Allegheny County Department of Human Services.

Several characteristics have enabled JJRS to play a critical role in improving the way youths with behavioral health needs are addressed in Allegheny County's juvenile justice system.

KEY POINTS OF ENTRY

JJRS service coordinators are present at every point where children enter the juvenile justice system to identify those in need of behavioral health evaluation. This practice has proven critical in improving the early identification of those with behavioral health issues and to more quickly arriving at diagnoses and treatment plans to address those issues and prevent adolescents from slipping deeper into the juvenile justice system, with the goal of having them successfully remain in their communities.

Key points of entry include Juvenile Probation intake offices. In Allegheny County, Juvenile Probation is responsible for processing the cases of youths who are referred by law enforcement to juvenile court in addition to supervising youths at home, school, in their communities and in court ordered placements, making sure they follow court orders and repay their victims, arrange opportunities for youths to develop competency skills and other duties.

Other key points of entry where JJRS has a presence include the county's Shuman Juvenile Detention Center and the regional offices of the county's Community Intensive Supervision Program (CISP), an alternative to incarceration that enables eligible youth to live at home while attending mandatory, structured and supervised after-school, evening and weekend programming.

SCREENING

JJRS works to ensure that youths are screened to determine their need for behavioral health treatment, regardless of the portal through which they enter the juvenile justice system.

The typical initial screen is the Child Behavioral Checklist, a simple screening tool that is administered voluntarily. It is intended to indicate the possibility of behavioral health issues and the need for more thorough evaluation. The widespread use of this initial screen is done with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Other assessments include the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument-2, which is given to youths entering the Shuman Juvenile Detention Center.

SERVICE COORDINATION AND MONITORING

JJRS service coordinators manage the cases of youths identified as having behavioral health issues. Oversight and treatment coordination extends across systems and programs and includes, for example, regular triage sessions at the Shuman Juvenile Detention Center and case review meetings at all regional CISP offices.

Their responsibilities include developing an appropriate treatment plan in coordination with Juvenile Probation, making sure prescribed services are provided; monitoring progress; ensuring that critical information regarding each youth is conveyed to, and understood by, intervening agencies and providers; monitoring youth assigned to placement facilities; and, upon their release, ensuring a smooth transition to their communities, and the continuation of services and other necessary measures to help youths remain in their neighborhoods and avoid reoffending.

EDUCATION AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

JJRS provides critical information on behavioral health issues and the county behavioral health system to a wide range of juvenile justice stakeholders, including judges, probation officers and supervisors, CISP staff, juvenile detention center staff and families of youths involved in the juvenile justice system.

The goal is to enhance their understanding of behavioral health and the supports available to youths with behavior health issues. JJRS service coordinators, for example, are present in juvenile court proceedings to provide information as questions arise so judges are better informed about such issues as a youth's progress in treatment and the capacity of various placement facilities to address behavioral health issues.

JJRS also provides formal behavioral health training for probation officers and other stakeholders.

PARENT PARTICIPATION

JJRS embraces a philosophy that includes engaging parents and other family members in all phases of planning and treatment as part of a comprehensive effort to improve the outcomes of youths with behavioral health issues.

Practices that enhance parent participation include clearly explaining the JJRS role in oversight and how parents can participate in planning, assessment, treatment and discharge; respecting parents' knowledge about their child and the key role they play as part of treatment team; and maintaining certain standards in dealing with families, such as promptly responding to phone calls, keeping parents informed in a timely manner and providing honest and accurate information.

These and other JJRS practices have resulted in parents participating in 86 percent to 92 percent of critical juvenile justice meetings involving their children.

STAFFING AND SUPERVISION

JJRS staffing standards, training and supervision are also key characteristics related to its success. JJRS, for example, hires staff who bring to the agency a depth of experience and diverse backgrounds, which range from psychiatric inpatient care and residential treatment to behavioral health and experience in the county's Children Youth and Families system. "We hire people who have years of experience in the field," said Debra Freeman, HSAO executive director. "They are dedicated to the field – they are not trying it out to see if they like it. They've been around."

Staff members receive extensive ongoing training. Each staff member takes at least 40 hours of training every year on issues in the behavioral health and/or the juvenile justice fields. Supervision is extensive. JJRS has practiced an "open door" policy since its inception, giving staff members access to any supervisor any time they are available.

And supervisors are readily available, Freeman said. "Our supervisors supervise. They don't have 90 percent of their time tied up in administrative work. They're free more than 90 percent of the time to focus on the six people they supervise. Their job is to take care of those people so they can go out and do their jobs." In addition to daily access to supervisors, there are regular formal supervision meetings, as well as group supervision sessions, which enable staff to share resources and experiences.

Another factor is the continuity of leadership within JJRS. Freeman, for example, has been the executive director of HSAO from the day it was created.

Officials make sure the JJRS mission is clearly understood by all who work at the agency, as well as the fact that their work is part of a collaborative network that includes behavioral health, juvenile justice, youths and their families and others. An emphasis on respect is another characteristic. “We value our staff,” Freeman said. “How we treat staff is how we want them to treat families. We expect our staff to be respectful to families, kind and empathetic. So we treat them same way.”

Such steps have led to a workplace that is highly supportive of staff and understands the difficult nature of working with youths involved in the juvenile justice system who have behavioral health issues. One measure of that success is the low turnover rate within JJRS. In the past five years, the few who have left the job did so for reasons that included promotion, having children and other changes in their personal lives, Freeman said. None expressed dissatisfaction with the job or agency, or said that burnout was a factor in their decision to leave.

BUILDING BLOCKS

The evolution of JJRS and the multi-system collaborative environment it is a key part of was a deliberate process that was neither easy nor quick. Lessons learned from its evolution from concept to practice identified several factors as being critical for achieving success.

- Top officials of Allegheny County’s human services and juvenile justice systems were firmly committed to the idea of establishing a lasting, collaborative partnership to better address the needs of youths with behavioral health issues. These leaders included the director of the county Department of Human Services and its Office of Behavioral Health, the administrator of Juvenile Probation and Common Pleas Court Family Division judges. This commitment among top officials proved essential to keeping the effort on course, particularly during the early stages of development, when changing the long-standing tradition of working independent of one another was the most challenging.
- Maintaining a focus on improving the well being of the youths in question was important in mitigating resistance.
- Extensive cross-systems training helped staff better understanding and appreciate each other’s systems, the regulations they work under, their points of view, responsibilities and challenges.
- Finally, there was recognition that such a fundamental change in approach would take years, perhaps as long as a decade, to become the widely accepted way of doing business. Today, JJRS is an integral part of a multi-system collaboration that is seen in

Pennsylvania as a model for ensuring that youths in the juvenile justice system who are struggling with behavioral health concerns receive comprehensive and coordinated services tailored to their needs that offer them the best opportunity for a future in which they steer clear of the criminal justice system and, instead, lead successful lives in their communities.



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