

TAKING REFORM DEEPER

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We have a vision that is guiding our efforts to build an effective juvenile justice response and take reform to a deeper level. It goes beyond any one program or service strategy. While it encompasses the values and principles of JDAI, Balanced and Restorative Justice, graduated sanctions, and System of Care, our vision takes us beyond any single approach, redefines our definition of the youth in our system and turn to the community for solutions.

For a young person who penetrates deeply into the system we know that he or she endures co-occurring disorders – not delinquency caused by substance abuse but both occurring together, often along with other challenges in the areas of learning, mental health, and socialization, creating a web or woven fabric in which the young person becomes both labeled and entangled. Pulling at one thread will not loosen the knot.

Nearly 70% of the young people in the backend of our system have issues with substance abuse, so along with 9 other sites nationally, including the two other model JDAI sites – Cook and Multnomah – we are part of an effort funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to improve the system of care for substance abusing youthful offenders. The Initiative is called Reclaiming Futures. Up until 2001 there were only 36 research studies published on what works in the area of adolescent treatment and those studies were poorly conducted. We are attempting to contribute to the body of knowledge in this important area, and we know that as we make progress we will be able to further reduce our reliance on detention. It will be critical for the Juvenile Court to understand the proper response to relapse, if we are to make progress in this area. On a hopeful note, there are currently three dozen more studies in the field, so we will soon be entering a renaissance of knowledge in this area.

We are building a system where the young person can be thoroughly assessed with a validated instrument without having to lock them up to do so. We are using the GAIN as

recommended by the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment and Reclaiming Futures developed by Dr. Michael Dennis at Chestnut Health Systems, and the Kids on Track Assessment Tool by Allvest, which can tell us which of the domains represent the highest risk areas. Our service plan can then target those areas and we can then periodically reassess to see if our work is effective.

We envision a day when each family can participate as full partners. Families can identify their own solutions and develop a plan which becomes part of the court order for addressing the concerns and challenges, including public safety and victims' concerns. We believe that it is probable that we, in the formal system, have created barriers that push families away. We have an expectation that our staff will be able to speak to and communicate with their clients, and that our services and programs will respond to the cultural values of the families we serve. Currently, 47% of the Juvenile Hall staff is bilingual and 50% bicultural.

We know that adolescents are not yet fully formed adults, and so we recognize the importance of social learning and behavior cognitive strategies as important tools in our efforts to help the young person mature and gain skills, to move beyond adolescent concrete thinking to adult abstract capabilities. We, therefore, have been training our staff and community partners to utilize these evidence-based approaches. We are fortunate to have a manager who is a certified training of trainers in Behavioral Cognitive Therapy.

We envision a service plan that follows the young person wherever he goes. Relapse, arrest, expulsion, runaway – these all cause a break in service or treatment. In the juvenile justice system the young person is like that tiny shoe in the game of Monopoly – at risk of losing his turn, being sent to jail, having to sell off assets to survive, and then starting over. We envision a seamless continuum of services where no matter where you are in the system, everybody knows your name. Your passport of services goes with you and the entire system of care is working in the same way, with each provider ready to pick up the effort even though the setting may have changed. That is why we have

developed a treatment providers' network and have invested in training our providers in the same evidence-based assessment and treatment strategies.

We have worked to reduce our dependence on institutional care. We have worked to improve our system response through assessment, family partnerships, evidence-based practices and a seamless system of care. But that is not enough – we know that we must re-define our view of young people and see them through a new lens, a lens which allows us to know them in terms of their potential in the community, not as “detainees,” “addicts,” “probationers” or our “wards.” In the most fundamental way, we know that community engagement is a necessary step in that effort.

We envision individualized pathways back to the community for each child. A pathway in which a young person becomes a contributing member of society. Youth development and pro-social opportunities are leveraged and developed in our system by probation officers working as community developer and as an employment/training developer. The Community Developer is creating linkages with community members who in turn can provide opportunities by developing neighborhood accountability boards, and by bringing in students from the University of California, Santa Cruz, to work with young people in our system. Our youth development officer oversees our youth community garden partnership with local master gardeners into an entrepreneurial post dispositional detention alternative. She has also developed the Culinary Institute with our local hospital at which a visiting reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* covering JDAI was recently served a salmon dinner prepared at the hospital kitchen by one of our young people.

We believe that our community-based partners are life saving way stations along this pathway....they are not merely our “contractors.” They can provide service opportunities that go beyond wearing orange vests and picking up litter by the road, but instead put young people in the important roles of reclaiming the environment – work in which they can take pride. We want to go beyond providing recreation and move instead to youth leadership – that is why our soccer team transitioned players into the roles of paid

recreation leaders (they could pay restitution and learn coaching skills). Our community-based agencies are building true youth leadership opportunities, showing young people the pathway out of the justice system through field trips to the university, not the prisons. One of our community-based partners sponsors a youth leadership group comprised of youth on probation that was recognized by the entire community last week as community heroes.

By building hope, expressing our belief in them, our optimism for their futures, and seeing their assets not their deficits, we can fashion a response to youth that truly makes a difference in their lives and protects safety as well.