

**Beyond Buzzwords:***Making Partnerships Work  
For the Benefit of Youths*

By Melissa Knight

**I**ntegration, collaboration, leverage, partnership, team — these are all words used to describe successful initiatives. It is true that anything can be accomplished with just a few dedicated and passionate individuals who are willing to tackle challenges and work to achieve what was thought to be impossible. Pinal County, Ariz., has put such efforts to work in moving toward the implementation of its Integrated Family Court.<sup>1</sup> During the process, those involved learned valuable lessons and realized unexpected benefits.

**Why Partner?**

Why would corrections professionals working with juvenile delinquents want to enter into a partnership with an agency that addresses marriage dissolutions? This perhaps unconventional partnership gives correctional staff the chance to address concerns about juveniles returning to unhealthy home environments. It has been said that the integrated family court is “the modern-day successor to the juvenile courts, created to promote a positive change in the juvenile offender.”<sup>2</sup>

The body of replicated, validated research outlining risk factors for juvenile delinquency is extensive and frequently cited. With lists reaching 24 different items categorized into four different domains (see Table 1), it is apparent that no single factor can be identified as a direct and sole cause. The presence of any factor increases the risk of delinquency, and the presence of more than one factor can increase the risk beyond a mere cumulative effect. Yet so often each agency that comes into contact with at-risk youths applies its singular strategy to a singular domain of each juvenile’s life. At the other end of the spectrum are the various agencies that each attempt a stand-alone holistic effort. To be effective, agencies must stop competing for limited resources, stop pointing the finger of blame at one another for failing these youths and actively join efforts.

Doing more with less is not just the latest cliché to describe what is requested of the juvenile justice system; it is the constant state of affairs, the status quo. In his William H. Rehnquist Award address, Judge Leonard Edwards of the Santa Clara County Superior Court pointed out that the “juvenile court was envisioned as the setting where societal intervention on behalf of children would take place if parenting had failed to ensure that children are properly raised.”<sup>3</sup> This is no small undertaking. Anyone who works in the field of corrections has experienced the impact of chronic underfunding. As noted by Francisco J. Alarcon, former deputy secretary of the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, “Juvenile corrections usually falls beneath sheriffs, police, the judiciary, state attorneys, public defenders and adult corrections in the pecking order for resources.”<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, as evidenced by risk factor research, the challenges facing juveniles in the system have grown more complex since the juvenile court was envisioned more than 100 years ago.

The American Correctional Association’s express purpose is to “promote the coordination of ... services to reduce fragmentation and duplication of effort and increase the efficiency of correctional services,” and to “develop and maintain liaisons ... for mutual assistance and the interchange of ideas and information, and to extend and strengthen cooperative working relationships.”<sup>5</sup> Many of the other organizations that serve the corrections profession — the National Association of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the Child Welfare League of America, the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention, the American Bar Association, and the State Justice Institute — have embraced the same purpose and put it into practice through summits, workshops and printed documents. Pinal County looked to these national organizations, as well as many local agencies, for guidance and support (both moral and financial) as it embarked on the journey of establishing active and working partnerships to implement its Integrated Family Court.

## What Does a Working Partnership Look Like?

The “what works” body of knowledge is full of projects and outcome research that evolved from criminal justice initiatives based on unconventional partnerships. These partnerships include:

- The community policing movement with partnerships between law enforcement and citizens;
- The restorative justice movement with partnerships between victims and corrections; and
- The “problem-solving court” models with partnerships between courts and the treatment community.

Problem-solving courts have taken the form of drug courts, domestic violence courts and mental health courts, among others. They are often referred to collectively as “therapeutic jurisprudence.” Some professionals have included the concept of integrated family courts under the therapeutic jurisprudence umbrella.

The term therapeutic jurisprudence is enthusiastically embraced by some and a source of deep controversy for others. However, at its heart, therapeutic jurisprudence is about agencies coming together and sharing information and resources to better the lives of those they serve. Edwards called the juvenile court “the original problem-solving court.”<sup>6</sup> The problems to be solved are those identified in the various lists of risk factors. They remain the same regardless of where or how each juvenile and his or her family enter the justice or social service systems — via dependency, delinquency or contested custody matters.

In almost every instance of successful partnerships that have led to proven or promising practices, the key has been a symbiotic relationship among the agencies, a relationship that makes each agency better than it could be standing on its own. Members of the San Bernardino, Calif., Operation Nightlight Program, a police-probation partnership, confirmed this when they traveled to various project sites. They found that “the most ineffective use of the collaboration was when it was used as a crutch for one agency,” simply using another agency in the partnership to perform the less desirable duties.<sup>7</sup> Effective partnerships must mirror the kind of interconnectedness identified in some communities as a protective factor.

## How Is a Successful Partnership Built?

Leadership literature frequently speaks to the importance of new initiatives developing from the bottom up. Likewise, partnerships that are imposed by the highest levels of administration without analysis and input from those “in the trenches” are not likely to succeed. Effective partnerships begin with the unification of purpose that naturally evolves when various agencies that are impacted in some way by the same issue resolve to address that issue. Concerns identified by line staff percolate through management to administrators, and outreach to other agencies begins. At this point, the highest level of leadership or administration is critical in bringing the right representatives of each agency to the table — those dedicated and

**Table 1. Childhood Risk Factors for Child Delinquency and Later Violent Juvenile Offending**

### Individual Factors

- Early anti-social behavior
- Emotional factors such as high behavioral activation and low behavioral inhibition
- Poor cognitive development
- Low intelligence
- Hyperactivity

### Family Factors

- Parenting
- Maltreatment
- Family violence
- Divorce
- Parental psychopathology
- Familial anti-social behaviors
- Teenage parenthood
- Family structure
- Large family size

### Peer Factors

- Association with deviant peers
- Peer rejection

### School and Community Factors

- Failure to bond to school
- Poor academic performance
- Low academic aspirations
- Living in a poor family
- Neighborhood disadvantage
- Disorganized neighborhoods
- Concentration of delinquent peer groups
- Access to weapons

**Sources:** Loeber, R. and D.P. Farrington, eds. 2001. *Child delinquents: Development, intervention, and service needs.* Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications; Wasserman, G.A., K. Keenan, R.E. Tremblay, J.D. Coie, T.J. Herrenkohl, R. Loeber and D. Petechuk. 2003. Risk and protective factors of child delinquency, *Child Delinquency Bulletin Series.* Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (April).

passionate individuals who are willing to work toward the seemingly impossible. Line staff or middle management are often in the best position to identify these individuals, but the invitation should be extended by the person with the most authority. Each agency must approach the table having identified what it can contribute toward the solution, rather than what it might extract from the partnership.

Next, a facilitator must be identified. The most effective facilitator will be solution-focused and will not have a vested interest in the outcome of the group’s work. Formal training is helpful but not necessary; there are plenty of publicly available resources to guide the work of anyone chosen to facilitate a group.<sup>8</sup> It is more important to identify someone who uses reflective listening skills across the full spectrum of communication, both verbal and nonverbal. The



Members of the Pinal County Integrated Family Court Workgroup meet at least once a month.

facilitator must be able to manage and guide discussion without manipulating or controlling it. Perhaps most important to the partnership's success, the facilitator must be able to keep the group moving toward its identified goal.

Regardless of the process used, a plan must be developed and followed. Planning should include:

- Analysis of the problem and all its causes;
- Identification of existing strengths and resources, including experiences of other jurisdictions;
- Strategies to address the problem and its causes;
- Identification of resources needed to pursue those strategies, including additional people/agencies that should be involved in the process, such as the population to be served;
- Identification of desired outcomes or performance measures; and
- Collection of baseline data for comparison.

Various methods can then be employed to execute the plan. If the workgroup is large enough, subcommittees can be developed around the various strategies or task categories. If not, the group can work as a committee of the whole, pursuing each strategy chronologically or simultaneously. An implementation timeline identifying the tasks to be completed, the individual(s) responsible and completion target dates should be developed and reviewed regularly to keep things moving forward. The vast majority of decisions can and should be made by consensus. If an impasse is reached, it may be necessary for the highest-level administrators of each agency to meet as a group and agree on a resolution.

Finally, the criminal justice system has only as much authority as it is given by the public. This is maintained through various mechanisms, including funding. If the project is to be embraced by the court of public opinion and supported by public funding, the group's work must be transparent and accountable. Activities, goals and progress should be reported throughout the life of the project in any and all available outlets. It is generally best for this to be done by those in the higher levels of administration.

## What Happened in Pinal County?

Research reveals that there is an undeniable connection between juvenile dependency and delinquency and issues separately characterized as family or domestic matters. "Adolescents who have been exposed to conflict and violence tend to be aggressive and have multiple behavior problems, including ... delinquency."<sup>9</sup> Yet the court's response to these related issues is typically fragmented. In Arizona, the following response structure is common:

- Family or domestic matters are scheduled on civil court calendars and sometimes resolved by commissioners rather than judges;
- Juvenile dependency and delinquency matters are scheduled on separate juvenile calendars;
- Dependency matters are addressed with executive branch resources through child protective services; and
- Delinquency matters are addressed with judicial branch resources via the probation department, or with executive branch resources via the juvenile corrections department for secure confinement and parole.

This structure can result in a single family appearing in court on multiple dates, before various judicial officers, and meeting with any number of government agencies and contracted service providers. Such fragmentation is not a holistic or efficient way to identify, much less meet, the needs of a family in crisis.

The state's efforts to address this issue date back to 1989, and resulted in both a plan for developing integrated family courts statewide and a proposal for legislative funding. The plan was comprehensive; full funding was not forthcoming. At the same time, agencies working with and within the Pinal County justice system began to identify a number of obstacles to effectively serving families in crisis. Four different groups developed around isolated issues and, in July 2007, evolved into a single entity, the Integrated Family Court Workgroup.

This group includes representatives from the Public Defender's Office, the Attorney General's Office, Child Protective Services, Juvenile Court Services, the Pinal County Superior Court, the Clerk of Court's Office, the Pinal County Court Administration and the treatment provider community, as well as individually contracted attorneys. Input has also been provided by the Adult Probation Department and Adult Protective Services and is being sought from Conciliation Services. The group serves as the forum for planning and implementing the Integrated Family Court, Model Dependency Court Guidelines and Model Juvenile Delinquency Guidelines. The group applied for and, in June 2007, was awarded funding from the State Justice Institute for two personnel positions. This has allowed the county to improve the process for responding to families with multiple issues before the court and facilitate more effective use of existing resources. The workgroup meets as often as necessary depending on the particular issues or concerns being addressed and at least once a month. These dedicated and passionate individuals even take time to meet during their lunch hour. If effective, the Integrated Family Court will produce positive changes.

The project will reduce:

- The number of hearing continuances;
- The number of hearings and duplicate hearings per family;
- The number of post-judgment actions, including orders to show cause;
- The case-processing time from filing to “final order”;
- The length of time from case filing to service delivery; and
- The average length of stay at the juvenile detention facility.

At the same time there will be an increase in:

- The number of services accessed per family;
- The number of dependency cases dismissed;
- The percentage of hearings completed within statutory guidelines;
- The number of minute entries and notices put out within five days of a court proceeding; and
- Compliance with the court improvement project audit items.

Stakeholder and customer satisfaction will also be evaluated via satisfaction surveys administered quarterly for stakeholders and after each court appearance for customers.

Meanwhile, the very act of formalizing the workgroup has already improved and increased communication among those who serve families in the Pinal County Court system, contributing to a less adversarial atmosphere. Many of the issues that lead to an inefficient, ineffective response to these families can be solved with the one resource that is free: communication. For the remaining issues that require more resources and may seem impossible, the solution often lies within a group process that can at times be painful but is always exciting.

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For that group process to be successful, everyone must take individual responsibility for living up to the buzzwords of effective partnerships. As James Keller, founder of The Christophers religious group, said: “What this country needs is more people to inspire others with confidence, and fewer people to discourage any initiative in the right direction; more to get into the thick of things, fewer to sit on the sidelines merely finding fault; more to point out what’s right with the world, and fewer to keep harping on

what’s wrong with it; and more who are interested in lighting candles, and fewer who blow them out.”

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Integrated or unified family courts take many forms, often incorporating a one-family/one-judge approach. The overarching goal is to ensure provision of the full range of services a family may need without duplicated efforts or conflicting court orders.

<sup>2</sup> Schepard, A. and J.W. Bozzomo. 2003. Efficiency, therapeutic justice, mediation and evaluation: Reflections on a survey of unified family courts. *Family Law Quarterly*, 32(3):339.

<sup>3</sup> Edwards, Leonard. 2005. William H. Rehnquist Award Address. *Family Court Review*, 43(4):544-553.

<sup>4</sup> Alarcon, F.J. 2004. Juvenile corrections: Why would anyone want to work in this business? *Corrections Today*, 66(1):8-9.

<sup>5</sup> American Correctional Association. 2007. *Agency manual of accreditation policy and procedure*. Alexandria, Va.: American Correctional Association.

<sup>6</sup> Edwards, Leonard. 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Condon, C.D. 2003. Falling crime rates, rising caseload numbers: Using police-probation partnerships. *Corrections Today*, 65(1):44-49.

<sup>8</sup> See the Facilitator Resource Center section of the International Association of Facilitators Web site ([www.iaf-world.org](http://www.iaf-world.org)), as well as the “Building Effective Community Partnerships” part of the Systems Improvement Training and Technical Assistance Project Toolkit, prepared for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention by the Institute for Educational Leadership. See also Anderegg, M., T.E. Bamberger, A. Capizzi, P. Clark, C. Heaston, W. Hitchcock, G. Hyde, L. Inveen, E.W. Kelly, N. Kuntz, W.G. Martin, R. McClanahan, S.S. Siegel, J. Sulley and E. Welch. 2006. *A model for judicial leadership: Community responses to juvenile substance abuse*, section 5. Portland, Ore.: Portland State University, Reclaiming Futures.

<sup>9</sup> Stahl, P.M. 1999. *Personality traits of parents and developmental needs of children in high-conflict families*. Excerpted and adapted from Stahl’s *Complex Issues in Child Custody Evaluations* (Sage Publications, 1999) and *Parenting After Divorce* (Impact Publishers, 2000). Available at [www.parentingafterdivorce.com/articles/highconflict.html](http://www.parentingafterdivorce.com/articles/highconflict.html).

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