

Managing Disruptive and Violent Juvenile Offenders in the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice

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During a two-year period of reforms, the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) has undergone numerous changes in operational standards and protocols. In 2012, Gov. Nathan Deal appointed the Georgia Council on Criminal Justice Reform to develop recommendations for improving public safety and decreasing costs in Georgia's juvenile justice system. The council issued guidelines for a new juvenile code and reforms, and in May 2013, HB-242 was signed into law.

The new reform law prompted a wide range of positive changes within DJJ. It prohibited status offenders and certain misdemeanants from being housed in secure facilities. It mandated the use of a detention assessment instrument, and of validated risk and needs assessments prior to detention and housing decisions. The law also required DJJ and local probation agencies to develop and adopt a structured dispositional matrix to guide placement recommendations. To help improve youth offender outcomes and reduce recidivism, the department was also instructed to use evidence-based practices for serving youths in the juvenile justice system.

DJJ operates 26 secure detention facilities in Georgia, comprising seven long-term youth development campuses (YDCs) and 19 short-term regional youth detention centers (RYDCs). DJJ currently houses an average daily population of 1,400 juvenile offenders in its secure facilities (approximately 750 youths in RYDCs and 650 youths in YDCs). The department has seen a marked decrease in its inmate population at several RYDCs and a decrease in the amount and lengths of stay of youths sentenced to YDCs. This population reduction is due in part to provisions in the new Georgia law, which also specifies that only the more serious and violent offenders be housed and rehabilitated in secure facilities. As this reform has steered the system to a concentration of the most serious felony and superior court offenders in short- and long-term confinement, it has also brought additional challenges to the organization.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

An article published in the July/August 2014 issue of *Corrections Today* showcased DJJ undergoing juvenile justice reform while simultaneously taking steps to

change the culture and dialogue between youths and staff within all of its secure facilities. DJJ partnered with Kristine Jolivette, Ph.D., at Georgia State University under an Institute of Education Sciences grant to implement positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) in all secure facilities throughout the state.¹ PBIS is an evidence-based framework that uses a three-tiered system of support to establish clear behavior expectations for youths. This tier system designates a juvenile's level of intervention and support. PBIS.org describes the tiers as primary (school-wide), secondary (targeted group or simple individual plans) and tertiary (individual) systems of support that improve lifestyle results for all children and youths by making problem behavior less effective, efficient and relevant and desired behavior more functional. DJJ Commissioner Avery D. Niles signed a policy for the agency to implement the PBIS program in 2013. The framework teaches, models and reinforces the expected behaviors; the PBIS system uses data to inform facilities where changes need to occur to improve outcomes. This innovative framework would soon distinguish Georgia as a national leader in PBIS implementation in secure juvenile justice settings.

As juvenile justice reform continued to advance, DJJ was expected to produce improved outcomes for youths. This required additional evidence-based programming, staff training and buy-in from youths and staff. Work had to be done to assure staff this was not just another short-term solution for behavior modification. It took time and continued effort for staff to accept PBIS as a proven, evidence-based, data-driven, decision-making framework designed to deliver measureable results in young offender populations. After two consecutive years of data collection, DJJ has solid statistics to clearly demonstrate how facilities that have implemented PBIS with fidelity have experienced a significant decrease in the amount of youth-on-youth and youth-on-staff assaults, as compared to those sites that have failed to fully implement the framework with fidelity.

As a response to this, DJJ began to rely on a five-week program at behavior management units (BMUs) where youths were required to attend a “Thinking and Behaving Responsibly” counseling group. BMUs used a phased program, with a transition phase that required youths to work themselves back into the general population. The results of BMUs were mixed, with some unintended results (such as youths “homesteading” in the program and others struggling to progress in the phases). The program relied on the use of confinement to manage negative behaviors and prevent incidents. Several youths did not benefit from the program and, at times, created serious management issues because of self-harm or aggression toward staff and peers. There were multiple repeat offenders circulating through the program and returning shortly after. DJJ is currently in the process of revising this

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program to be more treatment-oriented, and it is anticipated that a new program model will be implemented during fall 2015.

Intensive Treatment Unit

While other interventions were being implemented, DJJ administrators saw the need for higher-level treatment for youths diagnosed with more severe and persistent disruptive behavior disorders (such as intermittent explosive disorder, conduct disorder and other prominent negative behaviors). DJJ received legislative and financial support from the state to build its Intensive Treatment Unit (ITU), located in Milledgeville, Ga. ITU is a secure residential treatment facility operated by DJJ with an authorized capacity of 30 youths. This unit treats committed males who have a well-established pattern of severe, persistent behavioral problems that cannot be adequately treated or managed in YDCs. Youths placed in ITU pose a major risk to safety, have a history of poor adjustment to less-intensive correctional programs and typically have significant mental health problems.

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residential section of the facility is divided into two dorms: a 20-bed unit designated for youths who are in the intensive treatment phase and a 10-bed transitional dorm for youths who have progressed to a point where they are ready to shift to a less intensive placement. The treatment program replicates a nationally recognized, evidence-based model developed by the Mendota Treatment Center in Madison, Wis.² Key elements of this model include:

Behavioral point system. A highly structured behavioral point system, referred to as the Today/Tomorrow Program, closely monitors the youths’ behaviors, provides daily and weekly feedback to the youths and is highly responsive to change. Unlike many similar point systems, the youths’ behaviors on any given day determine their level of privileges the following day. Additional privileges can be accessed by maintaining consecutive days of positive behavior ratings.

Treatment groups. Treatment groups based on using the Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress (SPARCS)³ group trauma treatment and the EQUIP⁴ model help youths think and behave responsibly and nonviolently by man-

aging anger, correcting self-centered thinking errors, building social skills with an emphasis on assertiveness and empathy, and developing an ability to make mature, moral decisions.

Individual therapy sessions.

Individual therapy sessions with a qualified mental health professional at least twice a week are recommended. Cognitive-behavioral principles will provide the framework for therapy as sessions are used to address individual issues (e.g., developmental trauma) and reinforce skills developed in treatment groups.

“Decompression” approach to defiance. This approach is based on the idea that defiant behavior can become cyclic and intensify when a defiant response to a sanction is itself sanctioned. This cycle of escalating defiance and increasingly restrictive responses to the youths’ defiance creates an antagonistic and counterproductive relationship between youths and staff. The decompression approach provides a process for responding to defiance that disrupts this cycle, decreases antagonism and improves youths’ bonds with staff.

Educational programming with qualified educational staff. Youths receive active instruction even while serving disciplinary sanctions as long as the youths’ behaviors allow for safe interactions with educational staff. Educational staff will receive training and ongoing guidance to facilitate modeling and reinforcement of skills that youths gain in their treatment groups.

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Life skills groups. These groups address basic activities of daily living, leisure skills, hygiene and grooming, communication skills and physical fitness.

ITU operates under the leadership of the facility director with the close support of a clinical director, who is also a licensed clinical psychologist. The high intensity of treatment activity and the volatile nature of youths placed in ITU requires a significantly enhanced ratio of staff to youths in security, education and program areas. The ratio of security and clinical staff to youths is about twice that of other DJJ secure facilities. Frontline staff receive specialized training and ongoing guidance from clinical staff to provide well-coordinated, treatment-oriented responses to disruptive and aggressive behavior.

ITU is an outcome-oriented, long-term program with no fixed time period. Based on decades of research with youths who have completed the Mendota Treatment Center’s program, it is expected that youths in ITU may show no sustained improvement for up to six months. Once youths demonstrate sustained periods of nonviolent, cooperative behavior, they are moved from an intensive treatment dorm to a transition dorm, where they experience a less restrictive environment and programming geared to help them navigate a

transfer to a step-down placement (e.g., YDC’s general population or community residential placement). Release is contingent on a pattern of acceptable behavior and an overall investment in treatment during the incarceration period.

Conclusion

DJJ is determined to further enhance, modify and develop its BMUs toward successful attainment of the commissioner’s vision and priorities. DJJ is de-emphasizing outdated programs that are dependent on the use of sanctions and punitive consequences, and instead is enhancing those practices with more strength-based and positive reinforcement-based programming. As DJJ shifts away from the use of confinement and migrates toward increased treatment and evidence-based programs, the department has begun tracking program and youth outcomes at the state level to ensure efficacy. DJJ is committed to continue efforts to enhance PBIS and other positive programming efforts to assure the continuum of behavior interventions is in the best interest of the youths and communities of Georgia.

ENDNOTES

¹ U.S. Department of Education. 2015. *National technical assistance center on positive behavioral interventions and supports*. Office of Special Education Programs. Retrieved from www.pbis.org.

² Van Rybroek, G.J. and M.F. Caldwell. 2014. *Mendota juvenile treatment center program*. National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices. Retrieved from www.nrepp.samhsa.gov.

³ Habib, M. and V. Labruna. 2012. *SPARCS: Structured psychotherapy for adolescents responding to chronic stress*. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Retrieved from www.resources.child-healthcare.org/resources/sparcs_general.pdf.

⁴ Gibbs, J.C., G.B. Potter and A.P. Goldstein. 1995. *The EQUIP program: Teaching youth to think and act responsibly through a peer-helping approach*. Champaign, Ill.: Research Press.



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