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## City Ramps Up Intervention for New PINS Diversion Effort

By Jeff Storey

Striving to keep kids out of court and away from destructive behavior, New York City has implemented an expanded array of what it says are proven services that can be delivered more quickly to families coming apart at the seams.

"Nobody else is using this level of intervention," said Sara Hemmeter, executive director of the Family Assessment Program (FAP) of the city's Administration for Children's Service (ACS), who describes the initiative as "revolutionary."

Ms. Hemmeter said that the recently implemented enhancements to a long-running program provide "swift outreach" to troubled and troublesome adolescents and their families and an "immediate connection" to a "continuum" of "evidence-based" techniques.

The city has signed up 380 families for the program since November. It has the capacity to handle 850 at any one time and 3,400 over the course of a year.

The services are available to families with youth under the age of 18 who are candidates for Family Court designation as a Person in Need of Supervision (PINS).

Family Court Act §712 defines a PINS as a youth who does not attend school; is "incorrigible, ungovernable or habitually disobedient and beyond the lawful control" of his or her parent or legal guardian; or who violates marijuana possession and prostitution statutes.

Parents who turn to the courts for help in coping with their kids "have done everything they know how to do," said Sylvia Rowlands of New York Foundling, one of several nonprofit agencies contracted by the city to offer PINS-diversion services. "And they are scared to death on behalf of their kids."

However, the law requires "diligent efforts" to deal with family issues before a PINS petition can be filed.

Participation by families in FAP, the city's designated PINS diversion program, is voluntary. But a case can move into court only after a determination has been made that there is no "substantial likelihood" that a youth would benefit from the offered services.

And if a parent actively refuses to participate, he or she is prohibited from filing a petition.

Last year, ACS saw 7,329 youth; approximately 872 petitions were filed in Family Court, down from 1,000 three years ago, ACS says.

In any case, parents whose PINS petition is accepted may not get the help from the court that they want or expect.

"The courts don't know what to do with these cases," said Ms. Hemmeter who added that judges sometimes offer to the sullen teens who appear before them little more than "a good talking to."

But Judge Edwina Richardson-Mendelson, the administrative judge for the city Family Court, said that the court has little leverage in dealing with PINS families who want their children detained or placed in a mental health program.

"The court is not legally permitted to do what the parents seek in these cases, and the parents feel that the court has failed them," she said in an e-mail. "The reality is that there is no provision in the PINS law for the court to remove a child from a parent and place the child in a locked facility.

Many of the children involved in PINS cases are engaged in seriously destructive behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, gang activity, chronic running away, and sexual exploitation (prostitution). Some of these children are literally living on the streets, and there is no lawful manner to provide them with the treatment they need.

"The child must by definition be a willing participant in the services offered in PINS cases, and unfortunately, in many of these cases, that is not the situation," the judge said. "The court may order the provision of services, but the court is not able to do much if the child refuses to participate."

Moreover, taking a teen who is acting out to court may further splinter a relationship that is already fractured, said Mark Kleiman, executive director of Community Mediation Services in Queens, another FAP contract agency.

"It's a lose, lose, lose proposition" for the PINS, the family and the courts, he said.

'Robust' Evaluation

To avert that situation, the city has "changed the whole model" of its diversion efforts, said Michele-DuBowoy of the Children's Aid Society, another contract agency.

attitudes toward fighting and yelling; and whether he is thinking of hurting or killing anyone.

Once the screening is complete, the families are assigned to one of several therapeutic programs tailored to their circumstances.

The city has contracted with several nonprofit agencies to provide the services: Berkshire Farms (the Bronx); Catholic Guardian Society (the Bronx); Child Center of New York (Queens); Children's Aid (the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Staten Island); Community Mediation (Queens); Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (Staten Island); New York Foundling (the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens) and Safe Space (Queens).

In some situations, a crisis team may visit a family's home, identify community-based supportive services and offer advice about how the family can better function. If further intervention is needed, a small team of therapists may conduct 30 one-hour sessions in the home in a four-month period.

Other teams treat adolescents with substance abuse and mental health problems, holding school and clinic sessions as well as those in the home for from two to five months. Still other therapists work with the entire family during multiple weekly visits to the home. And team members are available by phone 24 hours a day.

Finally, a child may be placed with a specially trained foster parent who, for up to 10 months, will set forth rules and expectations. Meanwhile, the youth's family will receive intensive therapy and training "to teach them how to provide discipline, supervision, and encouragement."

The city promises that it will closely monitor the results from this smorgasbord of services. Providers are required to achieve particular outcomes and must submit data about their progress to an ACS database.

Ms. Hemmeter and officials at the contract agencies say that the transition to the new diversion model has gone smoothly. Although she said it is too early to judge the results—the first service recipients are just completing their programs — fewer families have been returning to ACS with complaints about services.

All of the new techniques are "evidence based," a social work term for practices that have been developed in universities and evaluated in clinical trials much like the procedures used to test the efficacy of new drugs.

Evidence-based techniques are being used by "a handful" of U.S. localities, said Melisa Rowland, of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Medical University of South Carolina, a consultant to some of the contract agencies.

"The qualities that make this particular program unique are both the number of youths targeted for intervention annually, and the wide array of services that are being offered," said Dr. Rowland.

The city already has experience with the techniques. It says that they have been instrumental in reducing the incarceration of juveniles who commit serious crimes such as assault and robbery.

By stepping in earlier and applying the evidence-based methods to youth who commit "status crimes," the city hopes to head off future problems.

A PINS petition is "a real good predictor" of future delinquency, said Lawrence Busching, ACS' executive deputy commissioner, who heads the agency's Division of Youth and Family Justice.



From Left to Right: Laurence Busching, Sarah Hemmeter, Jahmani Hylton of the Administration for Children's Services. The City agency has implemented, enhanced "evidence-based" therapeutic techniques to improve family functioning and keep teens out of family court.

photo by Rick Kopstein

The new approach is "dramatically different," said Mr. Kleiman, who calls it a "better use" of the city's money.

Before November, FAP staff would conduct an initial assessment and then refer most families to a contract agency for a more detailed four to six week evaluation, delaying the provision of services — if they were available at all.

FAP now performs at the outset "a more robust" evaluation right away, said program director Jahmani Hylton. Both the child for whom a PINS ruling is sought and his parents are closely questioned about family relationships, the child's school experiences, "negative or delinquent" peers, violent behavior and family conflict, mental health and medical issues.

For example, ACS staff probe opportunities that the child has to "learn, grow and succeed"; his participation in family activities; the rewards for good behavior and the consequences for bad; family support networks; the child's sexual activities; drug and alcohol consumption; employment and use of his free time; how the child deals with his frustrations; his