

For Juveniles, Alternatives to Incarceration
by Commissioner Neil Hernandez
June 2, 2008

Last year, Mayor Michael Bloomberg pledged the most sweeping reform in decades to the City's juvenile justice system which would reduce the average length of stay in detention, create alternatives to detention and placement for youth, assist young people leaving detention with re-entry into their home communities; and engage families in addressing mental health issues by ensuring uninterrupted service delivery upon release.

That reform effort has already yielded significant results. The success of the overall reform effort has resulted in a decrease in detention population levels, with the population in Non-Secure Detention group homes declining by 13.4 percent and in Secure Detention by 1.7 percent from July 2007 through March 2008.

These successes have enabled Department of Juvenile Justice to reduce capacity, cutting annual costs to taxpayers by \$1.8 million.

A series of innovation programs have contributed to this.

Collaborative Family Initiative

Launched in February 2007, the Collaborative Family Initiative provides juveniles who are in need of mental health support with continuing, uninterrupted services upon release.

Nationwide, youth with mental health service needs are over represented in juvenile justice and child welfare systems. Of the more than 600,000 youth processed through juvenile detention centers each year, 70 percent suffer from mental health disorders. In New York City, youth with mental health issues comprise 82 percent of all juveniles in detention. On average, young people needing mental health service stay in detention twice as long as unaffected youth and are more likely to be incarcerated.

The initiative links these young people and their families to community-based providers, ensuring that after release they continue to receive critical mental health and psychiatry services in their neighborhoods without interruption or delay. The young people are enrolled in the program while still in detention so that upon release from custody, the youth receive immediate psychiatry and/or mental health services free-of-charge through community-based not-for-profit providers. Their families receive supportive counseling, direct mental health services if they have an unmet need, and additional referrals as necessary. The city pays for services to the young people for the first 90 days following release.

Participation in the Collaborative Family Initiative also has helped reduce the average length of stay in detention for youth with mental health and psychiatric needs. According to an interim report on the initiative issued May 23 by John Jay College and the Department of Juvenile Justice, 81 percent of youth released during the initial phase of the program remained with their families and were not re-arrested on new charges during the post-release period.

Risk Assessment

In another effort to ensure that the city keeps in custody only those youth that need to be detained, the department will factor in the results of the new Risk Assessment Instrument into its decisions about releasing youth to their families. The instrument was created by the Vera Institute of Justice in conjunction with the Criminal Justice Coordinator's Office and other juvenile justice stakeholders.

Before a youth's case concludes, the tool assesses the probability of the youth returning to court and the likelihood of re-arrest. The Risk Assessment Instrument is a proven approach that has yielded significant results in other jurisdictions where it has been adopted, including Multnomah County, Ore.; Santa Clara County, Calif; Cook County, Ill.; and the State of Virginia. The risk assessment complements the Release to Parent initiative, implemented in October 2007, that enables the department to discharge those youth arrested on nights, weekends and holidays, who do not pose a serious risk to public safety.

Re-entry Supports Program

The juvenile justice system and the Family Court process can be complex and intimidating to youth and their families. Little comprehensive information on juvenile justice processing exists, and much of it involves abstract legal concepts. As a result, young people and their parents or guardians sometimes feel that they lack any kind of meaningful influence over the outcome of their case and may decide against actively participating in the adjudication process. This can result in young people remaining in detention when they simply don't have to.

To address this, the department recently established the Re-entry Supports Program, in partnership with John Jay College, to familiarize youth and families with early-release options and to formulate tools to help young people re-entering their communities better understand and navigate the juvenile justice system and connect with local resources.

The Re-entry Supports Program will provide every resident of a detention facility with easy-to-understand information about the court process, hearings and how to act in court. Every family with a young person in detention also will receive instruction, through multi-media, a multi-lingual court guide, and Internet tool, on parental involvement and navigating the court process.

LIFE Transition Program

As part of the mayor's effort to reduce poverty in the city, the Department of Juvenile Justice's LIFE Transitions Program targets young people with school attendance issues or performing below grade level in an effort to get them back in school. It also promotes early career exploration. The LIFE Transitions Program, which includes juvenile offenders whose cases are processed before the adult courts, is a significant investment in youth who are considered likely to enter state detention facilities. The program prepares them for transition back to their communities and enables them to continue working with the same community-based organizations upon release from detention.

The Next Steps

Given the success of the overall reform effort in reducing the demand for Non-Secure Detention group homes, the department will close two of these facilities in the city's next fiscal year, which begins July 1. Despite citywide budget reductions, the administration has expressed its commitment to the Collaborative Family Initiative by ensuring its continued funding through fiscal 2009.

While the reforms and the results they have produced so far are compelling, simply sustaining these programs is not enough. We can and must do more for our families and our young people by investing in programs that reduce the use of detention while still ensuring public safety, and that offer the promise of more positive and meaningful outcomes for juveniles. In the last decade, New York City's juvenile justice system has evolved from one focused on custody and security to one that promotes public safety, addresses risk factors, including mental health and poverty, and serves the needs of youth. At the same time, it strengthens families and communities.

The support of the public, including community and faith-based groups, is essential to continue these efforts and to ensure that critical services are sustained for youth and families. In addition, the department needs New York State to be an equal fiscal partner and the courts to continue this forward momentum and make certain that the goals identified in the mayor's vision for juvenile justice reform are fully achieved.

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