



Deinstitutionalization of Status Offenders Best Practices Database

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Connecticut Families With Service Needs (FWSN)

Intervention:

In 1980 the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) was amended to include a valid court order (VCO) exception that allowed judges to incarcerate status offenders for violating a judicial court order that prohibits youths from engaging in status offense behaviors, such as running away. By allowing judges to detain status offenders in secure confinement when the judges are frustrated with youths' unruly behavior, the exception has undermined the goal of deinstitutionalizing status offenders. Connecticut is one State that has recently passed legislation eliminating the VCO exception for judges. It instead emphasizes providing status offenders and their families with services in the community.

In 1981, Connecticut implemented the Families With Services Needs (FWSN) program, which classified certain types of behavior of youth (such acting out beyond the control of parents/guardians, habitual truancy from school, indecent or immoral conduct, or running away from home) as status offenses rather than delinquent acts. Connecticut's judicial branch was responsible for handling FWSN petitions and received more than 4,000 referrals from the system in 2006 alone. There were few diversion programs and services available to youths and families, and many status offenders were incarcerated not because they committed a delinquent act but because they violated judge-mandated rules regarding their behavior. The system became overwhelmed with the number of FWSN cases, thus many status-offending youths later committed more-serious delinquent offenses.

In 2005 the State Legislature passed reform that changed the approach for handling status offenders and their families. The law decriminalized FWSN youth by no longer allowing judges to use secure detention in cases where a youth has violated a FWSN court order. The emphasis was placed on therapeutic programming and services, rather than punitive sanctions for unruly behavior. The law was not officially enacted until October 2007, because stakeholders who were directly affected by the system change needed additional time to implement an alternative method to handle FWSN cases.

In addition to prohibiting judges from detaining youth in FWSN cases, the Legislature created the FWSN Advisory Board. The Board is in charge of monitoring the changes in the status offense system and of providing further recommendations for reforming the system. Following the recommendations from the FWSN Advisory Board, in 2007 the State Legislature passed another set of reforms aimed at the status offense system. Raise the Age legislation, which will go into effect in 2010, changes the jurisdictional age of status offenders to include 16- and 17-year-olds. The system that used to handle cases involving older status offenders (known as Youth in Crisis) was eliminated.

The law change also required that status offenders referred to the juvenile court for a first offense must be diverted from the system. Youths who are in crisis or deemed high risk after being screened by a probation officer would be referred to Family Support Centers (FSCs)—community-based nonprofit service providers that offer immediate support. The main goals of creating FSCs included preventing first-time FWSN youth from involvement in the court, diverting children already involved in the court from further involvement, and offering alternatives to secure detention for violators of FWSN court orders. Services provided to youths and families diverted to FSC include counseling, mediation, mental health, and respite care. Youths who are found to be a lower risk are currently not allowed to receive service from FSC and would be referred to local youth services or programs in the community.

The FSC multiservice model requires caseworkers to contact families within 3 hours of receiving a referral. They conduct an initial screening to determine the appropriate next step for families, including a comprehensive assessment and planning of services that can be offered within the center. FSC officials collaborate with other service providers in the community to provide youth with a successful plan of action. They work to strengthen families, provide treatment services, reconnect youth with family and schools (in cases of truancy), and increase the skills of youth and family in managing status offense behavior.

The system changes that occurred in Connecticut changed the thinking around status offenders and FWSN cases. The system concentrates now on providing youths and families in crisis with immediate diversion and intervention services that avoid involvement in the court system and target the problems that cause the status offense behavior.

Evaluation Methodology:

Information and data about FWSN cases was provided by the Connecticut Judicial Branch and the FWSN Advisory Board. The National Juvenile Justice Network and the Justice Research Center, Inc. have also collected information about FWSN cases.

Evaluation Outcome:

Although the legislation reform in Connecticut is relatively recent, preliminary data shows that the system changes are creating positive results. Comparing October 2006 through March 2007 with the same period a year later (that is, October 2007 through March 2008, when four FSCs were implemented in communities throughout Connecticut), the State witnessed

- A 41 percent decrease in the number of status offense court referrals, going from 2,131 to 1,267 referrals.
- A 94 percent decrease in the judicial handling of FWSN cases, dropping from 1,309 to 80 cases.
- An 80 percent decrease in the number of FWSN commitments, dropping from 30 to 6 commitments.

During 2007–09, 81 percent of youths who successfully completed a FSC program had no further involvement in the juvenile justice system.

There has been a decrease in the average daily population of secure juvenile detention facilities since 2006 as well. Before implementation of FSC, there were around 300 status offenders in secure detention in the State each year. In 2008, after the opening of the first four FSCs, there were no status offenders in secure detention.

References:

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