

Models for Change ILLINOIS

Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice

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Experts Recommend Improvements In Identifying and Treating Youth with Behavioral Health Needs in Illinois Youth Centers

CHICAGO – A team of independent experts reviewing programming at the request of the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) director Kurt Friedenauer reported Thursday that Illinois has made some progress in meeting the behavioral health needs of youth committed to the state, but the experts also found serious deficiencies and recommended ways to improve programming in the state's eight institutions.

The Behavioral Health Assessment Team said the state has not conducted proper screenings to identify youths' mental health needs, has not provided services to meet the needs, has not employed enough behavioral health staff to provide the treatment and has not given adequate training to existing staff.

The assessment was requested by Director Friedenauer as part of an overall effort to improve the quality of mental health services for youth in DJJ. The team was formed after the second of two suicides in DJJ facilities within a 12-month period (September 2008 and September 2009).

The report has been given to Friedenauer, who earlier this month resigned his position effective July 31, and to Arthur Bishop, who was named by Gov. Pat Quinn as acting director of DJJ.

"Thorough, evidence-based mental health assessments and services are critical to rehabilitating these youth," said Bishop. "When those steps are combined with proactive discharge planning and engaging families as partners, many youth can safely, successfully return to their communities. With the help of collaborators such as Models for Change, we can and will meet this challenge."

Friedenauer asked Illinois Models for Change, which is part of a 16-state juvenile justice systems reform initiative funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, to conduct a comprehensive evaluation with recommendations for improvement. Illinois Models for Change, under the leadership of Loyola University's Civitas ChildLaw Center director Diane Geraghty, assembled a team of seven veteran experts in the field, and DJJ gave them access to the eight facilities for site inspections and helped the team arrange interviews with staff.

At its core, the Models for Change Initiative is about building a juvenile justice system that works – for youth, for families, for communities and for taxpayers," Geraghty said. "A critical component of a successful system is effective response to the behavioral health needs of youth. While this can be done with greater success and at less expense in the home community, once

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youth are committed to the state's care, it is the state's responsibility to provide treatment and rehabilitation services that can keep juveniles from committing future crimes and a life spent cycling in and out of our jails and prisons.

"If the state agency charged with rehabilitating juvenile offenders is successful, young lives will be saved and communities will be safer, and we are confident this analysis can help DJJ achieve that success," Geraghty said.

Under the leadership of Edward Loughran, Executive Director of the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators (CJCA), the Behavioral Health Assessment Team examined both the statewide system and each of the state's facilities housing young offenders. Team members made site visits to the state's eight Illinois Youth Centers and interviewed with staff at the facilities.

The report includes an overview of each site and findings and recommendations regarding evaluations of young people entering the facility, mental health and substance abuse treatment of the youth, follow-up assessments, staffing levels, staff training and the preparation for returning the young people to their families and home communities.

The system-wide assessment included the following:

- Since its formation, DJJ has made an effort to improve its ability to respond effectively to youth with behavioral health needs. DJJ has taken steps to move away from a corrections-focused system and toward a developmentally-appropriate system of youth corrections. There has been some reduction in the long-term use of confinement as the principal intervention for youth who manifest behavioral problems. Another positive finding was the incremental transition to system-wide use of single beds and away from bunk beds that pose a serious risk for suicidal youth.
- Although nearly 70 percent of DJJ's institutional population (1,173 youth) was classified as having some type of mental health need, there often is no assessment or an inadequate assessment of their mental health needs or potential risk for suicide.
- There is a shortage of staff skilled in identifying and helping with behavioral health problems. "In most facilities, staff have received little or no training on emerging brain research, adolescent development, the impact of trauma, evidence-based behavioral health programming, de-escalation techniques, or other topics that are essential for understanding and responding to the mental health and substance abuse needs of youth in DJJ care," the report stated.
- DJJ does not appropriately prepare youth for their safe return to their homes. Planning for those with mental health and substance abuse problems begins too late, and little is done to connect them with services to help with their problems back in their home communities.

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- DJJ should adopt policies and practices that actively support family involvement with youth in DJJ care. Contact with family while a youth is in DJJ can give staff valuable information about the child's medical and mental health history, reduce a youth's sense of isolation and despair, and help improve life with family members upon release.

The assessment report contains detailed findings and recommendations for each of the Illinois Youth Centers (IYC), which are located in St. Charles, Kewanee, Harrisburg, Murphysboro, Joliet, Chicago, Warrenville, and Pere Marquette.

Some of the site-specific findings and recommendations include the following:

- IYC Kewanee, IYC Joliet and IYC Murphysboro use unproven screening, assessment and treatment approaches for youth in residential care and should adopt evidence-based practices. IYC Warrenville, IYC Harrisburg and IYC St. Charles, which serve as intake and reception centers, should develop and integrate individualized treatment plans.
- A shortage of critical behavioral health staff at six of the facilities should be corrected. The shortage is most acute at IYC St. Charles, IYC Harrisburg, and IYC Joliet. As a result, caseloads in these facilities are "unmanageable" and foreclose the opportunity for any meaningful treatment for youth.
- Training was identified as a critical need at all DJJ facilities. This includes basic and advanced training in subjects such as adolescent development, trauma, mental health, substance abuse and medical disorders, evidence-based practices, screening, assessment and treatment options, and successful crisis intervention techniques. The assessment team suggested partnering with colleges and universities located near several of the sites to help support such training.

In addition, the team report stated, "there was widespread agreement that DJJ leadership and supervisory staff need to do a better job of communicating and supporting the Department's statutory mission across and within facilities. In addition, the assessment team found a need for a clearer adoption and articulation of uniform policies in critical areas such as the use of isolation, seclusion and restraint and aftercare planning and implementation."

The text of the full report, which includes information about all team members and the site visits, is available at www.modelsforchange.net or http://www.macfound.org/juvenile_justice.

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About Models for Change

The Models for Change initiative is a national effort funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to create successful and replicable models of juvenile justice system reform through targeted investments in 16 states, including Illinois. In Illinois, Models for Change is supporting efforts to "right-size" the boundaries of the juvenile justice system, preserving its century-old commitment to individualized treatment and recognition of developmental differences; to address disproportionate minority involvement with the juvenile justice system; and to expand community-based alternatives to formal processing.