

Louisiana

Louisiana, the third state to participate in the Models for Change initiative, was selected because of the progress it has made since the 1990s in improving its juvenile justice system and the commitment of its state and local leadership to building on this momentum. In emerging from recent challenges, the state has found a new sense of urgency and a willingness to innovate that has created the potential for significant and lasting reform.

Models for Change-supported reform efforts in Louisiana will focus primarily on bringing about change in three areas: expanding alternatives to formal processing and secure confinement; increasing access to evidence-based services; and reducing disproportionate minority contact with the juvenile justice system. In addition, the initiative will provide support for statewide efforts to ensure that work carried out at the local level through Models for Change is aligned with the state's goals for juvenile justice reform. Louisiana groups working in these areas will be assisted by a number of national organizations and experts that comprise the Models for Change "National Resource Bank."

Alternatives to Formal Processing and Secure Confinement

In a model system, most responses to delinquency would be local and informal. Juvenile offenders would generally be supervised, sanctioned and treated in community settings. Opportunities for diversion would be made available at all critical decision points. Strategic screening and assessment tools would be used to connect youth and families to appropriate treatment services and support, without "widening the net" to take in youth whose cases would otherwise simply be dismissed. Judges and other juvenile justice decision-makers would have access to a broad array of efficient and effective community-based programs that provide both alternative dispute resolution and needed services, and would channel juveniles into these alternatives on the basis of their individual risks and needs. Secure confinement would be the choice of last resort.

Louisiana has made considerable progress in reducing its

reliance on secure confinement of juveniles, with state-run facilities now holding only about one-fourth the number of youth they did in the 1990s. But for the most part the service delivery infrastructure needed to respond to the increasing number of youths who are now retained in the community does not yet exist. Children and Youth Planning Boards mandated by state law for each judicial district could potentially provide local advisory leadership to address the problem, but need to be given the structural and funding support that is adequate to the task. Juvenile justice funding generally—including funding to develop and expand community-based programming—has resulted in a patchwork; and authority for screening and diverting youth away from formal processing and secure confinement and into alternatives is variable across the state. Consequently, consistent data collection and standardized procedures and protocols for identifying youth with problems better served by other agencies, and for diverting them from the juvenile justice system to appropriate community-based services and sanctions, have yet to be established with consistency across jurisdictions.

Goals | Strategies The goal of the initiative in this area is to expand and improve access to effective community-based programs and services that can serve as alternatives to formal processing and secure confinement in the juvenile justice system, primarily by showing how it can be done locally in demonstration sites. The approach will involve strengthening the capacity of local planning boards, along with local leadership, and working with them to assess and plan for local programming needs, develop and demonstrate good diversion policies, procedures, and practices, develop funding

mechanisms and expand the available continuum of care. If efforts are successful, best-practice models will emerge for local needs assessment and planning efforts, for interagency collaboration, for information sharing, and for funding of community-based services to youth and families. These models will be replicated in other areas of the state and at the state level, where applicable.

The work to be done in this area will include:

- Engaging planning boards in a thorough and collaborative strategic planning process, and facilitating coordination between the boards, the Office of Youth Development (OYD), and the Louisiana Children’s Cabinet to ensure that planning leads to action
- Fostering collaborations at the parish level that ensure that agencies/entities responsible for court-involved youth with mental health, substance abuse and other special problems are participants in the development of a viable diversion policy
- Analyzing data on the needs of youth/families in target jurisdictions and exploring new ways to meet them—including new contracting arrangements, blended or integrated funding strategies, and conversion of currently available post-adjudication programming for use with pre-adjudicated youth
- Developing new eligibility criteria for diversion, new guidelines for making diversion decisions, and new templates for diversion agreements
- Helping local jurisdictions develop relationships with colleges and universities to provide for data collection and analysis, training and education, program monitoring, and student rotations.

Evidence-Based Community Services

In a model system, local juvenile courts, probation departments and intake centers would be capable both of accurately identifying the needs of youth and consistently steering them to appropriate local programs and services. These

programs and services would be scientifically supported, having demonstrated their effectiveness or shown a strong likelihood of success in improving juvenile offenders’ behaviors or skills. And the system itself would contribute to the ongoing construction of a scientific base of support for these programs and services, consistently measuring the success of its interventions and actively encouraging the development and evaluation of new practices to meet the needs of youth in the juvenile justice system.

The shifting of youth from state-run secure facilities to local programs creates an opportunity to invest in more effective, evidence-based practices and interventions. However, the use of evidence-based practices at the local level is still rare in Louisiana, and adapting OYD-operated evidence-based programs to community-based settings and sustaining them locally will take funding, support, and training that is not currently available.

Goals | Strategies The goal of work in this area is to increase the availability of scientifically supported community-level interventions and the use of sound screening and assessment practices that serve to divert youth into those interventions. If the initiative is successful, the results will be better outcomes for juveniles and their families and a higher level of provider and system accountability. As a result of prompt screening and assessment, and expanded funding opportunities, youth will have a wider range of evidence-based programs and other promising services selected to meet their needs without having to go deeper into the system. Efforts in this area will include:

- Helping planning boards and local leadership to create a consistent screening and assessment process using appropriate tools at the earliest possible processing stages
- Reviewing currently available services in the targeted parishes, identifying barriers to the development and expansion of evidence-based practices, and assisting in the development of a plan for establishing or strengthening evidence-based practices
- Conducting statewide meetings, workshops, and other educational activities to raise awareness of the benefits

of evidence-based practices, and partnering with local colleges and universities to provide long-term training and education on these issues.

Disproportionate Minority Contact

In a model system, alleged juvenile offenders would receive fair treatment at each point of contact with the system, regardless of their race or ethnicity. All hearings, decisions, and services would be handled in an unbiased manner, and the system would monitor compliance with this ideal.

With respect to any racial or ethnic group that is found to be experiencing “disproportionate minority contact” (DMC) with the juvenile justice system, resources would be available to examine whether these youth have been treated differently or have not enjoyed equal access to services. The system would provide or advocate for equal access to community-based services for the group, and would seek wherever possible to prevent their entry or limit their penetration into the formal juvenile justice system. With more information, decision-makers would be better able to identify problems and address disparities.

While Louisiana, like other states, has taken steps to address the documented overrepresentation of youth of color in its juvenile justice system, work remains to be done to investigate the causes of the problem and to find solutions. Regular DMC data collection and analysis at the parish and state levels are essential to identify where problems occur in the system and why, but the capacity to monitor and analyze DMC varies considerably from parish to parish.

Goals | Strategies The goals of work in this area are to improve DMC data collection where needed, to develop the capacity to collect and analyze DMC data regularly at the state and parish levels, and to use DMC data analyses and other research to identify, implement, and monitor appropriate interventions to reduce disparate treatment and limit unnecessary penetration of youth of color into the juvenile justice system. If the initiative is successful, parishes and the state will have the capacity to conduct ongoing

analyses of DMC, and youth of color will have access to an increased number of community-based programs and services, particularly at the diversion stage and other front-end stages of the juvenile justice system.

Strategies to achieve these goals will include:

- Developing effective DMC data collection at the local level, isolating race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and other pertinent variables at key decision points
- Analyzing available parish and state data to identify overrepresentation and disparate treatment at various points of contact, from arrest through disposition and aftercare
- Developing a standardized model for quantitative DMC data collection and analysis throughout the juvenile justice system
- Using data and qualitative analysis to identify targeted interventions likely to reduce DMC, including structuring decision-making, employing diverse and culturally-competent staff in key positions, developing partnerships with families and community resources, developing alternatives to formal handling and secure confinement, and creating a full continuum of treatment, supervision, and placement options.

Other Reform Opportunities

In addition to the work that is focused on the three primary targeted areas described above, the Models for Change initiative in Louisiana will provide technical assistance intended to align and reinforce statewide reforms with local reform work. Models for Change will work with the Office of Youth Development on an implementation plan for its five-year strategic plan, develop the role of OYD with local planning boards, and aid in the replication of local Models for Change models to the OYD regional level; collaborate directly with the Louisiana Supreme Court on its Juvenile Drug Court and Family in Need of Services Program; and provide training specific to juvenile indigent defense to local grant sites.

Documentation and Dissemination

Information about the Models for Change initiative in Louisiana will be developed and disseminated to a national audience using a range of vehicles and strategies. A series of brief reports on the planning and implementation of change efforts will illuminate lessons learned and promising practices developed in targeted areas of improvement. Assessments will be conducted to create a firm evidence base upon which practitioners can rely in seeking to replicate initiative reforms in their jurisdictions. A “roadmap” for juvenile justice systems change will give other jurisdictions the materials they need to plan, implement, measure, and assess reform.

Progress to Date

The Models for Change initiative has made considerable progress in assembling information and laying the groundwork for juvenile justice reform in Louisiana. Grantees have been working in participating parishes to map the availability of local services for system-involved youth and their families, using a web-based survey instrument that will later be made available to other parishes in the state. A Models for Change “data group” has completed the first phase of a comprehensive data mapping process to determine what juvenile justice information is available in local jurisdictions at key processing stages, from arrest through discharge. Models for Change grantees are also exploring data quality and availability elsewhere in the state to determine how juvenile justice information may best be integrated into a statewide data warehouse for research and planning purposes.

Models for Change grantees are working closely with several Children and Youth Planning Boards to strengthen community involvement in juvenile justice planning, develop model approaches to information-sharing, and expand local and informal responses to delinquency. Members of the National Resource Bank have also assisted local Planning Boards in optimizing their organizational structures, establishing procedures and by-laws, and developing long-range strategic plans to grow and nurture evidence-based practices in their own communities.

In support of the alternative approach to formal processing employed by Louisiana’s drug court model, Models for Change has surveyed drug courts across the state to gather detailed information about their target populations, referral practices and funding sources, and to identify needs and strengths in the areas of screening and assessment, treatment and other services. Survey results will be used to identify gaps and priorities and to plan for the future. Models for Change has also surveyed offices of the Families In Need of Services (FINS) Assistance Program across the state and is developing a plan to standardize procedures and implement policy reform based on the results.

Models for Change is working to develop a best practice training curriculum for juvenile defenders and other system professionals throughout the state. A number of conferences and workshops have already been held to share knowledge regarding evidence-based treatment services, screening and assessment, disproportionate minority contact, and status offender issues with Louisiana’s juvenile justice stakeholders and policymakers.

State Leadership

In each state participating in Models for Change, a lead entity is chosen to develop and implement a state reform agenda and work plan. The Louisiana Board of Regents—a state agency that coordinates all public higher education in Louisiana—is the lead entity in Louisiana.

For more information about Models for Change in Louisiana, contact the Louisiana project coordinator, Melissa Champion at 225 342 4253, ext. 636, or Melissa.Champion@la.gov.