

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania was the first state selected to participate in the Models for Change initiative. It has a favorable reform climate and seems poised to become an exemplary system. There are strong partnerships among Pennsylvania’s stakeholders—judges, district attorneys, public defenders, community leaders, and city, county, and state officials—and considerable consensus about the strengths and weaknesses of the state’s juvenile justice system

Reform efforts in Pennsylvania focus on bringing about change in three areas: the coordination of the mental health and juvenile justice systems; the system of aftercare services and supports; and disproportionate minority contact with the juvenile justice system.

Pennsylvania organizations are assisted by other national players making up the Models for Change “National Resource Bank.”

Mental Health | Juvenile Justice Coordination

In a model system, professionals in the fields of juvenile justice, child welfare, mental health, substance abuse, and education would work collaboratively to produce better outcomes for youth and their families. County agencies and public schools would provide services to young people who misbehave as a result of mental health problems and would not refer them to the juvenile justice system unless their offenses were serious. If such youths were arrested, the juvenile justice system would be able to tap into community-based mental health services. Juvenile probation officers and juvenile court judges would be knowledgeable about adolescent development and mental health and would have access to high-quality assessments and appropriate services. Young offenders’ privacy rights would be maintained, and agencies would be able to collect and share information appropriately. Upon leaving placement, the treatment received while in care would continue.

Perhaps due in part to the decline of the state’s community-based mental health system, the mental health needs of Pennsylvania juvenile offenders currently are not

being met. Efforts to address this problem must focus on a number of specific conditions, including lack of coordination between county children and youth agencies and the courts; absence of placement prevention services and re-entry services; inadequate identification and diagnosis of mental health problems of court-involved youth; lack of access to appropriate services; and problems in collecting and sharing information across systems.

Goals | Strategies The goal of the initiative in this area is to improve the coordination of and access to mental health services for court-involved young people in Pennsylvania. If efforts are successful, possible outcomes include increased numbers of court-involved youth who have mental disorders being treated outside the juvenile justice system and increased access to appropriate and effective mental health programs and services. Site-based mental health reform efforts will link with the other two areas of reform—improvements in aftercare and equal access to services by minority youth. Improvements in access to mental health services will help keep youth out of delinquency placements in the first instance, and youth will have more and better resources available to them when they leave residential care. Efforts in this area include:

- Collaborations at the state and county levels among the agencies responsible for youth with mental health problems in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems
- Creation of interagency teams to expedite placement of youth into appropriate programs

- Adoption of a single multi-system screening and assessment instrument for all young offenders
- Promulgation of policies to reduce contact with the juvenile justice system for youth with mental health needs and divert them into community-based programs
- Development of blended or integrated funding strategies
- Delivery of evidence-based practices and programs.

Aftercare

In a model system, juvenile justice professionals would work to help juvenile offenders become law-abiding and productive citizens by connecting them with the programs and services they need to adjust and succeed after leaving residential treatment. Treatment plans would be integrated with aftercare plans to help offenders overcome problems, build on strengths, and acquire life skills. Returning young offenders would enroll immediately in school or have a job waiting. They would have quick access to the mental health or substance abuse treatment services they received while in care. They would have strong support from family or other caring adults. Their life chances would be better than when they entered placement.

Like their counterparts across the country, however, many Pennsylvania counties have fallen short of delivering aftercare of this quality for a variety of reasons. For example, placement facilities are not necessarily linking their services to the communities in which youth will live after placement, or where they will attend school, work, or receive additional support. Juvenile probation officers and residential treatment staff do not collaborate on rehabilitation and re-entry plans for youthful offenders. Judges at disposition reviews do not routinely ask about progress on aftercare plans, nor do juvenile defense attorneys aggressively promote aftercare. County child and youth agencies are closing their doors to young people who should be receiving services as “dependent youth,” and school districts systematically bar delinquent youth from returning to school. Evidence-based prevention programs are rarely used for youth exiting care.

Goals | Strategies The goal of reform efforts in this area is to improve aftercare services and supervision so that every young offender has a smooth and successful re-entry after being in a juvenile justice placement. If the initiative is successful, each youth in placement will have a high-quality aftercare plan that is completed in a timely fashion and properly implemented. The residential facility’s treatment plan will be integrated with the aftercare plan to prepare the young person for life after confinement. The residential facility’s staff will coordinate planning with the aftercare probation officer. Services will be available in the community that can support the plan. Strategies to improve aftercare include:

- Collaboration at the state and county levels to align institutional treatment planning and programming with reintegration programs and services
- Enhanced training for institutional staff in content areas crucial to healthy youth development and successful post-institutional adjustment
- Training and other support to help county juvenile public defenders advocate effectively for aftercare planning and services
- Coordination of efforts to re-enroll young offenders in school when they return from placement
- Support for more uniform statewide monitoring of aftercare planning and service provision.

Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC)

In a model juvenile justice system, all alleged offenders would receive fair treatment at each point of contact with the system, regardless of their race or ethnicity. All services, hearings, and decisions would be handled in an unbiased manner. The system would monitor compliance with this ideal on a regular basis. When overrepresentation is found, resources would be available to examine whether these youths are treated differently or have unequal access to services. Empowered with more complete information, decision makers would be better able to acknowledge problems and

address disparities and practices. The system would provide or advocate for equal access to community-based services by minority youth.

Pennsylvania has taken steps to address the documented overrepresentation of youth of color in its juvenile justice system, but much remains to be done. In addition to possibly being the product of disparate decisions based on race, this overrepresentation may be due to limited or unequal access to resources based on race, including options for mental health treatment and aftercare services. But missing data—including unreported ethnicity in arrest and juvenile court disposition data in half the counties—hampers efforts to describe the issue at the most basic level. Even where ethnicity information is collected, there is a lack of detail about Latino or Hispanic ethnic groups.

Goals | Strategies The initial reform goals in this targeted area are to move Pennsylvania toward becoming a model of DMC data collection and to use the data collected to bring about needed change. The approach entails:

- Detailed analysis of existing county-level data on delinquency case-processing
- Exposure of deficiencies, inconsistencies, and gaps in the data available
- Identification of local models of DMC data collection and reporting practice
- Statewide efforts to promote better DMC data collection and reporting and to better use the data currently available
- Identification of local jurisdictions and specific decision points for which the data suggest that race or ethnicity may be a factor in decision making
- Targeted training and technical assistance in areas where the data reveal significant disparities.

Documentation and Dissemination

A range of vehicles and strategies will be used to develop and disseminate information about the initiative's work in Pennsylvania. One report will explore current state and local policies and practices that are already closely aligned with the principles of the model system framework, and a second report will focus on other promising approaches developed as part of the Models for Change initiative. 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, for the benefit of practitioners and policymakers in other states.

Assessments will be designed to create a firm evidence base upon which practitioners seeking to replicate model systems project changes in their jurisdictions can rely, including assessment of the intermediate outcomes of site-based work in targeted areas, and assessments of the extent to which targeted reform efforts leverage change throughout the system. A “roadmap” for juvenile justice system change, based largely on Pennsylvania's experience, will show other jurisdictions how to plan, implement, measure, and assess change.

Progress to Date

Models for Change is helping to support an ambitious and still growing aftercare reform movement in Pennsylvania. With research and other assistance from Models for Change grantees, state leaders have adopted and disseminated a detailed joint policy statement laying out the features of a model aftercare system, to be achieved statewide by the year 2010. Using this vision statement as a template for assessment, a county-by-county survey of local aftercare practice has been completed, and more than half of the state's counties have already taken steps to align their aftercare approaches with the goals of reform. Models for Change-supported aftercare demonstration projects in five Pennsylvania counties are helping to show the way—working to improve educational transitions for youth coming home from institutions, assisting their families in sharpening discipline and

boundary-setting skills, providing job-readiness and employment help, and ensuring that treatment and other services provided in the institutional setting are continued in the community.

A similar statewide reform movement, stimulated and supported by Models for Change, is beginning the work of breaking down traditional barriers between mental health and juvenile justice agencies and improving the system's overall ability to screen, assess, divert, and meet the mental health treatment needs of court-involved juveniles. Leaders of seven key state agencies convened by the Models for Change initiative have issued a joint policy statement on mental health and juvenile justice, which is currently being disseminated statewide and used as an organizing tool for reform. Models for Change is helping to coordinate ongoing mental health and juvenile justice collaborations in three county-level demonstration sites as well.

Pennsylvania's leadership has consciously and publicly aligned state policy with some of the goals of Models for Change. Guidelines issued by the state's Department of Public Welfare have directed attention to the aftercare and mental health/juvenile justice policy statements, and called for local efforts to assess and improve aftercare and mental health service coordination in line with them. Following on discussions generated by the Models for Change initiative, Pennsylvania officials have begun to plan for a state-funded "Center for Evidence-Based Practices," which would offer ongoing technical assistance to counties that provide scientifically supported juvenile justice programs and services.

Models for Change grantees working with state agencies have already added considerable detail to the state's DMC data picture, enhancing policymakers' ability to pinpoint disparate processing of racial and ethnic groups at key decision points at both the state and county level. A Models for Change-produced instruction booklet has been disseminated to local juvenile courts and probation departments throughout Pennsylvania, offering guidance on more accurate racial and ethnic coding in connection with reporting juvenile de-

linquency dispositions to the state. Local Models for Change demonstration sites are changing their detention risk assessment procedures, working to improve cultural competence of staff, translating court forms into Spanish, and exploring minority "failures to adjust" in juvenile justice programs.

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. Juvenile Law Center (JLC) is the lead entity in Pennsylvania. JLC is a public interest law firm that advances the rights and well-being of children in jeopardy.

For more information about Models for Change in Pennsylvania, you may contact the Pennsylvania project manager Autumn Dickman at 215 625 0551 or ADickman@jlc.org.