

Innovation Brief

Ogle County's Juvenile Justice Council

Ogle County in northwestern Illinois looks like many rural communities, with a relatively small population (53,497) spread across a large geographic area (758 square miles). But Ogle County has distinguished itself from most rural — or urban — counties in Illinois by drawing together local juvenile justice and community leaders to forge shared goals for their system and to improve the outcomes of young people, families and the communities across the county. With *Models for Change* support, Ogle County's Juvenile Justice Council has opened lines of communications with the seven different law enforcement agencies and 11 school districts in the county, gathered and distributed data about juveniles in contact with law enforcement agencies, and developed a strong and successful model of local governance and planning. The Council has been strengthened by the strong personal commitment of county leaders in the judiciary, the prosecutor's office and probation services, and a small professional staff to keep the Council's work focused and rooted in research on county needs and best practices.

Ogle County has created replicable models of local collaboration to produce meaningful alternatives to prosecution or confinement and to improve resources for young people, families, communities and the juvenile justice professionals who serve them. Ogle's Juvenile Justice Council has increased diversion of young people from unnecessary system involvement; strengthened partnerships with schools, law enforcement, the community and other justice system partners; improved mental health screening and delivery of mental health services to those in need; increased local restorative justice options; and produced innovative strategies to encourage expungement of minor juvenile records, which often are obstacles to employment, education and success in life.

The Issue

Illinois' Juvenile Court Act (JCA) encourages, but does not require, the creation of juvenile justice councils in counties or groups of counties pursuant to formal or informal intergovernmental agreement. Councils are to be composed of the county state's attorney, representatives of law enforcement and probation services and can include service providers and schools. Councils are supposed to work

“in a cooperative and collaborative manner to prevent or discourage juvenile crime,” according to state statute.

The record of juvenile justice councils in Illinois is uneven. Some counties have never established a Council; others have allowed an existing Council to go dormant. Other Councils are very active and inclusive. But without a designated funding source, even active Councils often

struggle to maintain momentum and support, relying upon staff in busy state’s attorneys’ or chief judges’ offices to oversee operations. Because Ogle County’s leaders saw the potential of the juvenile justice Council as a vehicle to promote cost effective solutions for responding to juvenile delinquency and improve the lives of young people and their families, the Ogle County Juvenile Justice Council was given a new direction and purpose. In 2006, Ogle County became one of five Illinois demonstration sites in the MacArthur Foundation’s national *Models for Change* initiative. Adhering to the principles of *Models for Change* and assisted by grant funding and technical assistance from the Foundation, the Council became the vehicle to involve more community members in the formation and delivery of program reforms with an emphasis on early and timely intervention.

Between 2007 and 2012, Ogle County dramatically reduced the flow of youth into the juvenile justice system while preserving public safety and creating practical options for law enforcement, schools, prosecutors, defenders and judges to address underlying causes of delinquent conduct. During this time period, Ogle County:

- Reduced the filing of delinquency petitions from 130 petitions per year to 83;
- Reduced the use of detention admissions from 90 admissions per year to 46;
- Reduced annual adjudications (convictions) of youth from 47 to 25;
- Reduced annual commitments of youth to the state’s juvenile prison system from 6 to 4;

Youth diverted from formal system involvement through supervised diversion were unlikely to be arrested again – fewer than 5 percent of youth diverted in 2008 and 2009 were arrested during the first six months after their initial release. Since the inception of the program through 2012, 86 per cent of the youth successfully completing the diversion program had no further police contact or arrest.

Innovations

Community Involvement: Under the leadership of the State’s Attorney, Probation Department and the judiciary, the Council undertook strategic expansion to welcome a collaboration of service agencies, schools, local police departments and faith-based groups. The revitalized Council involved even more community members and asked for their help identifying the county’s top 10 juvenile justice needs. Those discussions evolved into a strategic plan, which is now presented annually as a “community report card” and includes data about trends and best practices.

Council staff cultivates opportunities to address service clubs and other community groups, and the staff schedules annual meetings in each of the 10 largest municipalities where local police, principals and other school administrators are invited to a briefing about Council activities and discussions of issues involving juveniles. The Council meets with school leaders at the beginning of every school year to renew their collaborative agreements and to discuss emerging issues and resources available. School superintendents are invited to tour the Ogle County Justice Center and meet with representatives of the juvenile court. Principles and Vice Principles meet with the Council on a school-by-school basis to share concerns, ask questions and develop shared strategies. A frequently updated website (www.oglejjc.org) has increased community awareness of juvenile justice issues and successful strategies to work with young people in conflict with the law.

Screening and Assessment: Through the Council, Ogle County has implemented an unprecedented cross-agency agreement that ensures juvenile offenders undergo a professional assessment at an early stage of their contact with the justice system and offers the youth a chance to get needed services as quickly as possible. The Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the state’s attorney, probation, public defenders and judiciary. Information received from the assessment of each juvenile helps determine whether the youth could benefit from a variety

of services, including mental health therapy, treatment for drug addictions and family counseling.

The voice of defense counsel was critical in developing a process to gather information about and respond to a youth's needs without placing the juvenile in jeopardy of self-incrimination. Under the finalized MOU, information gained from the assessment is not shared with prosecutors, without agreement of defense counsel and the youth. This means that youth can speak frankly, without fear of reprisal. Under this process, the majority of youth screened are diverted from prosecution and linked with community-based services and support. When youth are prosecuted, the assessment information provides valuable information to defense attorneys to advocate effectively for their clients and, eventually, for the courts to craft a more individualized, tailored response to a youth's actions, needs and strengths.

Case Tracking: All law enforcement agencies now use the same police contact form when gathering information about juvenile contacts. The contact form replaced several forms used by individual police agencies and has reduced paperwork while providing all necessary information for the state's attorney. In addition, the forms, copies of which are given to the youth, include information to guide them in applying for expungement of records. The county also developed a model integrated juvenile justice data system, which links the State's Attorney's Office, Probation and Court Services and the Circuit Court Clerk. Computerization of the records has better informed the Council with data about youth coming into contact with police, which in turn allows the community to maintain a continuum of interventions and services which meet the needs of local youth and families.

Case Processing: Coupled with the tracking is a case processing protocol addressing how juvenile police reports are assessed and low-risk offenders more often receive diversion services. Before the improvements, police reports often contained little information on the juvenile, and "diversion" meant a decision not to adjudicate but without

assessment or delivery of services to the juvenile. As a result, some officers and departments were less likely to divert a youth from prosecution if they felt that no services or accountability would result. Ogle County's proactive and data-driven diversion efforts have also drastically reduced probation caseloads, which allows officers to focus resources and support on higher risk youth, in alignment with evidence-based practices.

BARJ Approaches: With the improved case tracking and case processing came more reliance upon diversion strategies and restorative justice approaches. After these improvements were implemented, two-thirds of all juvenile arrests have been diverted to Balance and Restorative Justice programs. Hiring a part-time BARJ coordinator has expanded use of victim-offender conferencing, victim impact panels and other restorative practices that engage the community and repair harm caused by juvenile crime.

Expungement of Records: In Illinois, juvenile records are not supposed to be public, but arrest and court case information sometimes does reach potential employers and other members of the public. The Council recognizes those records can make it hard for youth to get jobs, student loans or even a place to live. Discussions among Council members produced consensus that unnecessary obstacles to school, employment and stable housing hurt individual youth and also the community as a whole. Reducing and addressing these barriers could encourage rehabilitation and prevent a return to the juvenile justice system and improve the well-being of the communities across the county. Based on this consensus, the Council developed forms to explain the process to expunge juvenile records, and the county now notifies youth when they may be statutorily eligible (a sufficient time period has passed since successful case termination) for expungement and provides guidance on filing petitions, if desired. The Council also developed protocols with local law enforcement to reduce unnecessary fingerprinting in cases which are not "court bound" and to reduce unnecessary transfer of records to the Illinois State Police and, subsequently, to the FBI.

Schools: Ogle County’s Council invites school officials to participate in all aspects of the Council’s work. This collaboration has produced new protocols to address student conduct that might otherwise result in serious discipline, suspension or expulsions from school. In 2009, Ogle County launched a program now used by all Ogle County School Districts at the middle and high school level. Prior to program implementation, schools would routinely call police to respond to minor offenses such as disorderly conduct, resulting in unnecessary arrests and use of police resources, without addressing the youth’s underlying issues or needs. The Council worked closely with school leaders and the probation department to develop an Alternatives To Suspension program for youth who may otherwise have been arrested. The ATS program provides support for youth who agree to serve suspension time at the county reporting center where they catch up on schoolwork under positive adult supervision. In return, the schools cut the suspension time in half and remove the suspension from the student’s records.

Domestic battery: Ogle County’s data also showed higher than expected rates of arrest and court referral for domestic battery cases in which a youth was accused of battery against a parent or other family member. The Council delved into this data and determined that the traditional arrest – prosecution – probation pattern applied to ADB cases was not producing the outcomes they sought for victims, youth or families. Under improved protocols, ADB cases are reviewed carefully at the point of law enforcement contact. Charging decisions are stayed, pending social history interviews and screening by a social worker to determine whether other options, referrals and interventions are more appropriate than prosecution of the youth.

Results and Lessons

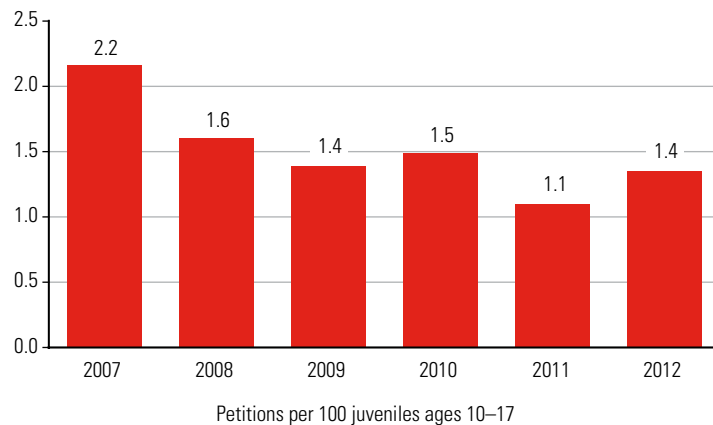
The Ogle County Juvenile Justice Council has identified several important points factors critical to successful local reform:

Collaboration and leadership: The active involvement and support of the judicial branch, the prosecutor’s office and the probation staff accelerated the pace of change. Having top representatives of all three at the same table kept lines of communications open and sent a signal to everyone else in their offices, as well as the community at-large, that the Council was doing important work in the interest of public safety.

Broadening the scope of the discussion: Expansion of the Council to include leaders working with youth on the margins and outside of the juvenile justice system increased awareness of the Council’s mission and its progress. Mental health service providers, school administrators, clergy and others developed a better understanding of the juvenile justice system and best practices and research findings about how best to keep kids out of the system and change behaviors so they might not come in contact with the system again.

Acquiring and using data: Ogle County’s successes are very much rooted in the effective and collaborative use of data to drive decisions, policy and programs. Gathering better data enables the Council to develop and tailor strategies to divert youth who could be better served in community-based programs away from the formal justice system, while preserving community safety and using scarce resources wisely. The Council also invested in improving the data systems themselves, to better link justice system agencies, reduce data gaps and redundancies. The Council is better informed – and can better communicate with others – because of this deliberate focus on gathering, analyzing, sharing and using data to guide their work.

Ogle County (IL) Cuts Its Formal Cases by Over One-Third from 2007 to 2012



Ogle County has sustained decreases in formal handling as law changes added 17-year-old misdemeanants in the juvenile court jurisdiction in 2010.

Sources: Petition counts from the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts Annual Statistical Summaries. Population counts from Easy Access to Juvenile Populations:1990-2012. available online at <http://www.ojdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezapop/>

Public outreach and education: Educating the general public about the juvenile justice system and the Council is important and requires an active, multi-faceted plan that does not rely on any single method of communications. The Council reports regularly to the community through local print and broadcast news media, a large annual forum, visits to communities outside the county seat, a website and speaking engagements. By making the community more knowledgeable about its work, a trusting relationship has been earned, and that has made it easier to introduce new ideas and change long-standing practices.

Skilled staffing: Because a professional staff member was hired to serve as executive director of the Council, the Council did not have to rely on volunteers with other jobs and priorities or staff on loan part-time from a county office. By employing one qualified person to be in charge, the Council was able to remain focused on a work plan, improve communication among Council members and with the public, increase regular attendance and participation at Council meetings, expand availability and use of data and research findings, and identify grant opportunities.

Looking Forward

To sustain these relationships and the momentum of continuous system analysis and stewardship, the Council recognizes that it must plan for and adapt to inevitable changes in leadership of the county justice system and community organizations represented on the Council. Maintaining the pace of outreach to county residents, delivering sound educational information about the benefits of diversion and using data to inform its work will be important aspects of the Council's stewardship of the juvenile justice system for years to come. For example, data and open dialogue has helped the Council target chronic truancy as a priority for the immediate future, with the recognition that frequent absences from school often are a sign of trouble in the child's life. The Council's partnerships and expertise will be critical in addressing chronic truancy – with out building reliance upon the court system to mete out punishment to youth or families — to keep youth on track toward the kind of positive outcomes the Council seeks for communities across Ogle County.

Resources

Ogle County Juvenile Justice Council Website:

<http://www.oglejcc.org>

Illinois statute governing establishment of a county

juvenile justice council: 705 ILCS 405/6-12

<http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs4.asp?DocName=070504050HArt%2E+VI&ActID=1863&ChapterID=50&SeqStart=25500000&SeqEnd=26800000>

Ogle County Memorandum of Understanding Regarding the Sharing, Disclosure and Use of Certain Juvenile Justice Assessment Information (September 2009)

[http://www.oglejcc.org/Brochures/MOU\[1\].pdf](http://www.oglejcc.org/Brochures/MOU[1].pdf)

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This brief is one in a series describing new knowledge and innovations emerging from *Models for Change*, a multi-state juvenile justice reform initiative. *Models for Change* is accelerating movement toward a more effective, fair, and developmentally sound juvenile justice system by creating replicable models that protect community safety, use resources wisely, and improve outcomes for youths. The briefs are intended to inform professionals in juvenile justice and related fields, and to contribute to a new national wave of juvenile justice reform.