

Innovation Brief

Improving Behavioral Health and Community Support in Evening Reporting Centers

In Cook County, Illinois, the juvenile court has implemented a strong continuum of alternatives to detention. Evening Reporting Centers, or ERCs, are a key component in this continuum. As an alternative to incarceration in the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, juveniles, awaiting trial or disposition of a warrant or who are charged with a probation violation, can be ordered by a judge to report to an ERC each evening, where staff provide structured programming, supervision, homework assistance, recreation, and meals.

Youth Outreach Services (YOS), a nonprofit organization serving at-risk youth and families, operates an ERC on Chicago's West Side. With *Models for Change* support and technical assistance, and in collaboration with other juvenile justice stakeholders, YOS introduced a pilot project to assess the behavioral health needs of young people ordered to the ERC and to link youth and parents with appropriate community-based services. Along the way, YOS learned that effective screening was only the first step in meaningful engagement of youth and families. By fully capitalizing on opportunities created by an ERC, YOS achieved better outcomes for those youth in the program.

The Issue

Youth Outreach Services has served more than 300,000 youth and families through a variety of child welfare, counselling, juvenile justice, and prevention services since its founding in 1959. In serving some of Chicago's most vulnerable neighborhoods, YOS has developed strong relationships with community members, law enforcement agencies, and juvenile court system leaders. With the support of *Models for Change*, YOS developed a pilot program aimed at identifying and addressing the unmet

behavioral health needs of youth entering the juvenile justice system.

While ERCs had proven an important and successful detention alternative strategy, YOS leadership and staff believed that their program could also serve as a way to identify unmet behavioral health needs among clients and provide linkages and support that would improve ERC completion rates and provide families with longer-term supports in their communities.

The pilot program targeted youth referred to the YOS Evening Reporting Center in lieu of secure detention and was developed and implemented in close partnership with the Juvenile Probation and Court Services Department of the Circuit Court of Cook County (Probation). The program was initially implemented in two ERCs, but changes in the detention population later limited the pilot to the ERC in the Austin community.

Youth reporting to the YOS ERCs were selected as the target population for the pilot for several reasons. First, working with these youth allowed YOS to intervene at the beginning of their involvement with the justice system to identify and address behavioral health needs with a goal of preventing deeper penetration into the system. ERC sites also provided consistent, sustainable, and prolonged access to these youth. Finally, because the majority of youth referred to the ERCs were African-American or Latino, the proposed pilot provided an opportunity to reduce disproportionate minority contact and confinement in Cook County.

In the beginning, the program protocol was narrowly defined: YOS sought to equip its staff to administer mental health screening tools with fidelity to every youth referred to the ERC, and to conduct evidence-based mental health assessments with youth whose screening results indicated a need for further action. As the pilot progressed, however, it became clear that although evidence-based screening and assessment is a crucial component of effective behavioral health supports for youth, the use of these tools alone is not always enough to change the trajectories of youth referred to the program. This was especially true as the population of youth referred to the ERCs changed to include higher risk youth who needed more intense and sustained intervention to achieve positive outcomes. Based on results from the initial stages of the program, YOS staff realized that ERCs offer a unique opportunity to engage youth and families in more holistic ways that responds to their behavioral health needs and improves their chances of success.

Innovations

According to YOS's initial protocol, the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument, Version II (MAYSI-2), screening tool was to be given to every youth entering the ERC program. Youth who screened as "critical" on the MAYSI-2 were to receive a follow-up assessment called the Behavioral Assessment System for Children (BASC). Community-based services matching needs were then to be identified by the Mental Health Liaison, who would also help link the youth to identified services.

After using this approach for approximately a year, several factors dictated a change in protocol. Staff determined that many of the youth had taken the MAYSI-2 screening several times before entering the ERC, typically at the detention center or through probation programs. Repeated administration of the tool compromised the validity of screening results. Many youth were scoring "null results" on the instrument, a sign that they were not engaged in the process; other youth who were identified as "at risk" at screening refused to take the follow-up BASC assessment.

In response, YOS revised the protocol. While structured, evidence-based screening and assessment remained a key component of the program, the focus shifted from simply administering the screening and assessment tools to engaging youth and families through the use of face-to-face interactions with clinical staff and the Service Coordinator. This process revealed that some youth were experiencing serious issues, such as family crises, that were not identified solely through the screening process and that were impediments to compliance with court mandates. As a result, the Service Coordinator increased her visibility and day-to-day interactions with the ERC youth, with a goal of increasing their willingness to work with her and complete the BASC assessment.

In addition to the emphasis on greater engagement in screening and assessment, YOS staff also increased youth and family involvement in problem-solving. Youth were given more input into their own service plans, and, with youth consent, staff recruited family members to participate in the planning process. When appropriate, YOS staff accompanied young people to court hearings

to provide support, to share information with probation officers and judges about obstacles the youth were facing, and to suggest strategies aimed at eliminating unnecessary detention stays. Staff also ramped up efforts to link youth and families with “normative” services, such as housing and health care. Over time, these shifts in focus and tactics led to adoption of a final program protocol and to the development of an expanded set of tools, a practice manual, and ERC outcome measures.

Results

In the first three years of the pilot, 42 percent of the youth screened showed unmet behavioral health needs. When those youth worked with the YOS Service Coordinator on a voluntary basis, 95 percent completed their ERC assignment and, as a result, were less likely to have a subsequent probation violation during a 3-month tracking period. Much of that success was attributed to focused one-on-one work with youth and families by the Service Coordinator, who successfully linked 82 percent of participating youth with appropriate community-based services. In contrast, none of the youth who refused one-on-one sessions with the Service Coordinator were linked successfully to services.

Memorializing the protocol and data

analysis. Because ERCs are part of a highly structured network of detention alternatives, each step of the protocol had to be planned, documented and agreed upon by juvenile court stakeholders. This process, while lengthy

and sometimes complex, produced a written practice manual to govern the efforts of ERCs to identify and meet behavioral health needs while fulfilling the obligations of a detention alternative program. YOS and the National Center for Juvenile Justice also developed a customized data-collection tool, Juvenile Case Automated Tracking System (JCATS), to collect data and facilitate outcome tracking and data analysis. The data provided by the JCATS system guided YOS throughout the changes and challenges encountered in the development phase.

Addressing trauma. More than one-half (58 percent) of the youth screened as “critical” reported high levels of traumatic experiences. Earlier identification of trauma assisted YOS staff in developing strategies to engage young people and families and provide the support needed to access community-based services.

Next Steps

The future of the pilot program is promising. An agreement has been reached and memorialized with Juvenile Probation to continue the existing YOS program. The model, together with the program manual and JCATS data collection system, has been shared with Cook County’s four other ERCs. In addition, the Probation Department has incorporated the services of interns from the Chicago School of Psychology into the ERC screening process and the Service Coordinator continues to be a key presence working with the youth, families, and YOS staff.

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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.