

IMPLEMENTING JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM CHANGE IN WEST VIRGINIA

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The Crime and Justice Institute (CJI), a division of Community Resources for Justice, works to improve public safety and the delivery of justice by providing nonpartisan technical assistance, research, and other services to improve outcomes across the spectrum of the adult and juvenile justice systems, from policing and pretrial through reentry. CJI provides direct technical assistance, assessment, implementation, research, data analysis, training, facilitation, and more. We take pride in our ability to improve evidence-based practices in public safety agencies and gain organizational acceptance of those practices. We create realistic implementation plans, put them into practice, and evaluate their effectiveness to enhance the sustainability of policies, practices, and interventions.

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OVERVIEW

West Virginia has overhauled community supervision programs, equipped staff with new skills, and improved the process for making treatment and supervision decisions in order to meet its goal of reducing the number of juveniles in secure facilities by 16 percent by 2020.

The state Legislature set that target in Senate Bill 393 (S.B. 393), which passed in 2015 when West Virginia's rate of juveniles committed to secure detention facilities was on the rise despite a falling crime rate. The majority of youth placed in custody of the state's Bureau of Juvenile Services (BJS) had committed low-level, nonviolent offenses. At a price tag of roughly \$100,000 to incarcerate a juvenile for a year, the cost was mounting.

S.B. 393 put in place new policies and procedures designed to decrease the number of juveniles being placed in secure residential facilities and increase the use of community-based programs shown to reduce recidivism. Early indications suggest West Virginia is well on its way to reaching its juvenile justice goals.

THE SHAPE OF CHANGE

S.B. 393 outlined juvenile justice improvements designed to address the causes of the upward trend in juvenile incarceration, improve outcomes for youth, and strengthen effective community supervision and services. The legislation included several provisions specifically related to BJS operations, including:

- A requirement to direct at least half of the state's juvenile justice program expenditures and contracted services toward evidence-based practices;
- An allowance for juvenile courts to divert youth committing status and nonviolent misdemeanor offenses to restorative justice programs like community service and mediation, rather than formal processing in the juvenile court;

- A provision for the statewide opening of more Youth Reporting Centers, which are community-based programs where judges can send youth who have committed lower-level offenses for evidence-based treatment; and
- An authorization for courts to adopt and use an assessment tool to help guide decision making, establish appropriate supervision levels, and influence program referrals.

To implement these policy changes, BJS identified several priorities on which to focus, with assistance from the Crime and Justice Institute (CJI). Those priorities included:

- Developing standardized training and professional development opportunities for BJS staff;
- Training and assistance to enhance BJS's ability to accurately score the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI) assessment, a standardized risk and needs assessment tool that predicts recidivism among BJS youth;
- Opening four new Youth Reporting Centers (YRCs) and satellite offices across the state; and
- Evaluating the existing Youth Reporting Centers and standardizing operations to improve structure and consistency for the existing and newly opened centers.

IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW POLICIES AND PRACTICES

For BJS, the implementation of new policies and practices to support the legislative changes brought about by S.B. 393 required a system-wide effort that included staff and administrators at all levels. Administrators undertook a significant effort to create buy-in among all levels of staff for the agency's new practices. These new policies and practices signaled an increased commitment to a community-centered approach to juvenile justice.

REDESIGNING WEST VIRGINIA'S YOUTH REPORTING CENTERS

One of the largest system-change efforts within BJS was the evaluation and redesign of the YRCs, a community-based alternative to incarceration that provides supervision, accountability, and support services. In early 2017, CJI evaluated each of the 12 existing YRCs. Over the subsequent months, CJI and BJS collaborated to develop a comprehensive program framework for the both the existing and new YRCs, which opened in the spring of 2017.

Based on the research in evidence-based practices for correctional interventions, the framework was a comprehensive program overhaul, which included a detailed description of the program and services to be offered at each of the centers;

direction regarding the use of assessment tools; a behavior management system for YRC participants; and guidance on YRC staffing, program monitoring, and evaluation. After piloting the framework in the summer of 2017 and making some adjustments, the YRCs implemented it statewide in the fall and winter.

STAFF TRAINING

For over two years, CJI assisted BJS in the development and delivery of new training for agency staff. To ensure sustainability, CJI led agency staff in a train-the-trainer process on newly-introduced curricula, including the Principles of Effective Intervention, Cognitive Interaction Skills, and Effective Case Management. With these new training skills, BJS staff were responsible for training most of the staff working at BJS's residential facilities. Staff from two other states where CJI was assisting with juvenile justice system improvement implementation – Georgia and Kentucky – also partnered with West Virginia to provide training on Aggression Replacement Training, a widely known and strongly empirically supported treatment curriculum for anger management for youth.

IMPROVING RISK ASSESSMENT

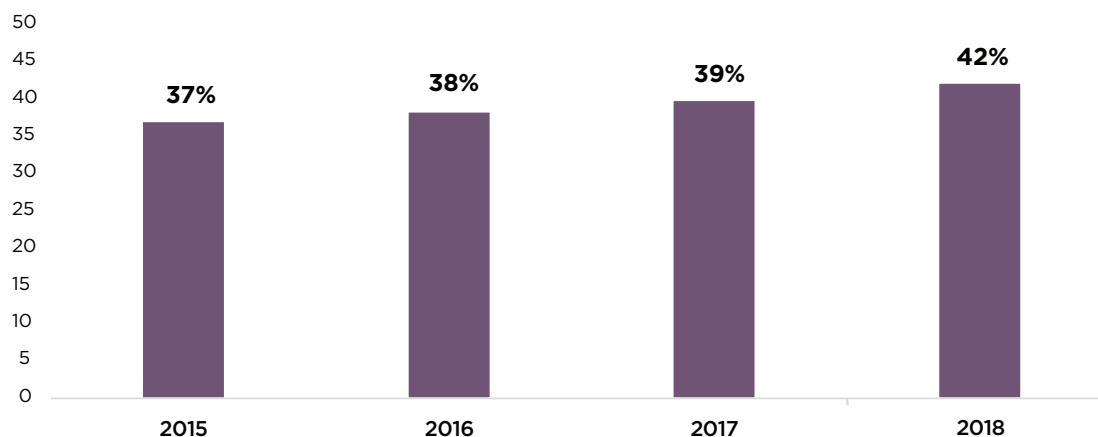
The YLS/CMI is the risk and needs assessment BJS utilizes for making treatment and supervision decisions. To ensure that those decisions were based on the most reliable and valid information, CJI led BJS staff through a series of activities to evaluate the accuracy of assessment scoring. The results revealed some inconsistencies in scoring. The agency's YLS/CMI trainers received new training and certification on the tool, and BJS developed an agency-wide booster training plan to support continued quality assessments.

KEY OUTCOMES

One primary goal of the S.B. 393 policy changes was to reduce the number of West Virginia youth in secure facilities. Examining the number of youth admitted to restrictive settings versus the number referred to community alternatives like the YRCs is a quantifiable way to measure progress toward this goal.

From 2015 through 2017, the overall number of BJS admissions decreased from 2,073 to 1,877. At the same time, the data show a steady increase in the percentage of juveniles referred to community-based interventions, from 37 percent in 2015 to 39 percent in 2017. The trend continued into 2018, with 42 percent of admissions referred to non-residential programs.

A LARGER PROPORTION OF YOUTH AT BJS INTAKE ARE GOING TO NON-RESIDENTIAL PROGRAMS



CONCLUSION

In 2015, West Virginia lawmakers recognized the need for significant change in the state's juvenile justice system. The cost, both in dollars and poor outcomes for youth, demanded change.

Passage of S.B. 393 prompted development and implementation of new policies and procedures designed to divert juveniles who had committed low-level, nonviolent crimes from locked detention facilities to community-based alternatives with a better track record of reducing recidivism and improving outcomes.

BJS remains committed to the work that started with the passage of S.B. 393 to improve juvenile justice in West Virginia. The widespread support for these changes and dedication by BJS staff has ushered in a new culture of system improvement and a commitment to the incorporation of evidence-based practices in the agency's operations. BJS has continued the process of rigorous staff training, program evaluation and improvement, and data analysis to track its progress on correctional outcomes and adjust as needed to improve the lives of the youth they serve.

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