



QUALITY SERVICES IN JUVENILE DETENTION

The Juvenile Detention Centers Association of Pennsylvania supports policies assuring the availability of high quality juvenile detention facilities to assure public safety and care for high risk individuals.

BACKGROUND

Juvenile detention facilities provide the community with a safe, secure residential option for youth in the juvenile justice system who are a danger to themselves or others. Within the recent past, courts have more aggressively moved toward the use of juvenile detention only in cases where other less secure options are not appropriate. Simultaneously, Pennsylvania along with the rest of the nation has experienced a recession unlike anything experienced by most decision makers at all levels of government. In addition, philosophical shifts toward community-based interventions along with a decrease in referrals to the juvenile justice system have resulted in a significant reduction in out-of-home placements.

CURRENT ISSUES

As local government has attempted to adjust to a multitude of issues, many difficult decisions have been made. The reduction of juvenile detention beds and the closure of juvenile justice facilities have made access to unique and specialized services more costly. Some counties have been able to downsize their facilities as one means of maintaining accessibility while minimizing cost. Other counties have been opted to close facilities, forcing the courts to seek distant facilities willing to provide the necessary services. This distance has made its impact on families who need to be included in the preparation for return home, legal counsel who need to prepare appropriate defense and recommendations, and behavioral and physical health services who wish to provide continuity of care.

The current funding allocations identified in Act 148 are based on a premise that is no longer appropriate. This premise is that reimbursement rates influence decision-making. Removal of youth from the community to ensure safety should not be based on fiscal disincentives. Funding for juvenile justice services is included in the Office of Children and Youth's Needs Based Budget Planning. This places juvenile justice agencies in competition with dependency agencies over limited dollars. The juvenile court system has identified a research-based risk assessment instrument and is working toward revised juvenile detention standards to improve the detention decision-making process. Juvenile justice professionals and victim rights advocates must have a system to address the unique needs of individuals who bypass prevention programs and present risk to those around them.

The juvenile system and detention must continue to develop affordable technology tools necessary to collect, analyze and report data. Without the influence of data to inform decision-makers, isolated incidents that create public misconceptions are far more likely to lead to costly and ineffective policy. For example, data shows us that since 2007, detention admissions continue to decline while youth entering detention are experiencing a significantly higher rate of behavioral health problems than the norm.

There have been several policy positions initiated during the past administration in an effort to improve the quality of care for youth; however these policies have had significant impact on the services that have traditionally been available to address the needs of youth who present as non-compliant or physically aggressive. The increased use of family and community-based interventions and the move to eliminate the inappropriate use of restraints have both resulted in improved services and outcomes for many youth. However, non-secure programs are less willing to accept youth who threaten to run away or who may be combatant. This leaves counties with fewer resources leading to decisions that place youth at one extreme or the other (maintained in the community or placed in secure programs) as the myriad of options that had been developed are no longer available. We believe that when policy decisions are intro-



duced, there must be an honest effort to engage the public and professionals in the field in dialogue and debate in order to ensure the final product is one that benefits all of our served populations

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Juvenile Detention Centers Association of Pennsylvania recently hosted a public forum which included juvenile justice professionals and stakeholders from across the state. We believe that the incoming administration should continue to prioritize community safety while encouraging best practices. We further believe that the following recommendations will be critical towards accomplishing this overarching goal.

- Re-evaluate the funding mechanisms to determine the most appropriate formula to ensure child and community safety. With the support of the Office of Children Youth and Families, legislative action would be needed to evaluate and change the current funding structure.
- Provide juvenile justice with its own unique status within the administration
- Provide dedicated funding to meet the demands for state-mandated training. Juvenile detention is the only child welfare/juvenile justice entity that does not receive training dollars.
- Provide funding to allow detention centers the ability to implement a statewide data system that would save state and local dollars in the long term and create opportunities for improved policy development almost immediately.
- Engage the expertise of juvenile detention administrators or the Juvenile Detention Centers Association of Pennsylvania prior to advancing practice and policy changes.

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