

Areas of Need and Related Recommendations for Louisiana’s Juvenile Justice System

Stephen Phillippi, PhD, LCSW & Debra DePrato, MD

Area of Need: Valid tools have yet to be disseminated to scale at critical points outside of post-adjudication (e.g. FINS, diversion, specialty courts, and re-entry services).

Recommendation: All entities tasked with screening and/or assessment in the juvenile justice system (FINS, diversion, probation, specialty courts, detention, secure care, and re-entry providers) should be mandated to use best practice decision-making tools.

Louisiana should recognize the success of several pilot projects that have been introduced throughout the state and support the dissemination of these practices to bring them to scale. The use of these valid screening and assessment tools accomplishes a number of things beneficial to the youth and the system. These tools assist in the identification of needs; guide matching of needs to services; and provide data to systems to continually offer a snapshot of the needs of youth contacting the system so service planning and resource allocation can be better achieved. Technical assistance is needed to assist in the identification of the proper instruments for each decision point, as well as ensure quality implementation. This technical assistance should also guide development of policy and processes that address proper sharing of information, data utilization, and sustained implementation.

Area of Need: Screening and assessment is not enough, known risk and needs must be prioritized and then addressed as necessary for both public safety and improved youth and family outcomes.

Recommendation: Ensure that effective and timely linkages are made to appropriate services for youth following the screening and assessment process.

Screening does not change behaviors or outcomes; however, they can simply and effectively identify issues that need to be evaluated further. Positive screens should lead to assessments, and assessed issues should then be matched with services designed and proven to respond to that particular issue. These assessed issues must also be prioritized, since not all issues can or should be addressed simultaneously. In an ideal system, assessment measures in order to addressing risk and needs. This provider effectiveness, move youth needed, and monitor the changing more strategically design or youth continue to receive objective help demonstrate progress in feedback can be used to determine into less or more secure settings as needs of a jurisdiction in order to maintain their service array.



Area of Need: Successful pilots have been demonstrated, typically driven by active and functional Children and Youth Planning Boards receiving technical assistance; however this is the exception and not the norm for practice across Louisiana, especially for multi-parish jurisdictions reliant on state versus local resources.

Recommendation: Local and state juvenile justice officials should work closely with the Louisiana Behavioral Health Partnership and OJJ to map available services, inform the development of new services, and work to address barriers to access these services.

Nationally and in Louisiana, far too many youth with mental health and substance abuse needs fail to find help prior to coming into contact with the juvenile justice system. One of the best supports a juvenile justice system can have is a behavioral health system that is accessible and effective so that symptoms of mental illness do not become behaviors reframed to delinquent actions resulting in youth being sent away from the very community services needed. In fact, one of the best supports for a healthy, functional probation and diversion system is to have services that can be accessed so that costly out-of-home placement does not become over used.

Louisiana is undergoing a major transition in its behavioral system with the introduction of the Louisiana Behavioral Health Partnership, which remains in its early stages (starting in March, 2012). While this is a promising step, to date, many available and/or developing services are not fully implemented. Mapping available services to inform stakeholders of both what is available and what is needed is critical. Gaps include alternatives to detention such as family crisis response and respite care, as well as clear linkages to mental health and substance services to prevent youth from unnecessary penetration of the system.

Mapping should lead to strategic planning that identifies barriers to accessing services, such as geographic distance, transportation, waiting lists for services, unmet needs, and a lack of a timely response to identified needs. Unfortunately, in these cases, worsening behavior is rarely looked at as a flaw of the system, but rather solely, as an increase in their individual delinquent activity. Accessible, quality behavioral health services, delivered in a timely manner can lead to some of the most substantial reform needed in the juvenile justice system ensuring youth with mental health disorders are effectively treated.



For more information download the entire report, “Sustaining Juvenile Justice System Reform: A Report to the Louisiana Juvenile Justice Implementation Commission,” at

<http://publichealth.lsuhsu.edu/iphj/sustainingreform.html>