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|  | Alaska Department of Health and Social Services  Division of Juvenile Justice |
| **System Improvement Summary**  *For 2015 State of Alaska Crime Summit* |

The Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), in the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services has devoted intensive effort over the past decade to improving services and outcomes for juvenile offenders, their victims, families, and communities. The results have been promising and provide lessons to other agencies seeking to improve their results.

Two factors helped set the stage for DJJ to launch its multi-faceted system improvements efforts. First, a federal appropriation enabled the division to create a **new, comprehensive juvenile offender management information system** in 2002 that dramatically increased the statistical information available regarding offenders and their contact with the juvenile justice system. Second, division leadership was determined to have **objective assessment instruments and quality-assured processes** employed at all critical points in the juvenile justice system, to ensure that decisions made and services provided were documented, data-informed, and based on sound practice.

**Among the evidence-based initiatives launched as a result:**

* A **Detention Assessment Instrument** to assist probation staff in determining whether to place juveniles in secure detention beds.
* **The Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory**, an internationally recognized and validated risk/need assessment for identifying those juveniles at high risk of re-offending and the case management they need to end their criminal behavior.
* **Performance-based Standards**, a national, ongoing quality assurance process to ensure the delivery of safe and effective services in juvenile facilities.
* **Aggression Replacement Training**, a curriculum proven to change behavior of youth demonstrating chronic aggressiveness.
* **Mental health clinical capacity** for juveniles in secure facilities, screening for mental health needs, and procedures to identify and intervene when youth may be suicidal.
* **Improved substance abuse education and interventions**, including adoption of evidence-based curricula and staff certification. The importance of addressing substance abuse needs was demonstrated, at least anecdotally, when DJJ embarked on an effort to interview former DJJ clients who were now residents of DOC facilities. These former DJJ clients said that if their substance abuse needs had been addressed and they’d received help building job skills and employment opportunities they would have had more success in avoiding future criminal activity.
* **Transitional services** for juveniles using the nationally recognized Intensive Aftercare Program model, facilitating the difficult transition from long-term confinement to juveniles’ home communities.

In addition to these statewide efforts, the division also has encouraged local service improvements through the ***results-based accountability***strategic framework. Under general direction and support from the division’s central office, regional and district probation offices and facilities have generated local solutions and partnerships to improve **educational and employment** outcomes for youth and reduce recidivism rates, particularly among **Alaska Native youth** and those with **behavioral health** disorders.

The division’s latest initiative to improve outcomes is in adopting the **trauma-informed approach** to working with juveniles. National research has demonstrated the significant role of adverse childhood experiences in contributing to criminal behavior, health problems, and other adverse outcomes, and the division’s early experiences strongly suggest that staff trained in trauma improve their understanding of the connection between past trauma and current behavior, and improve their ability to intervene more effectively. Also, in response to the high rate of substance abuse among juveniles, the division researched **substance abuse treatment programs** and is preparing to implement the evidence-based “Seven Challenges” curriculum for youth in its secure treatment facilities.

Is there evidence these efforts have been effective in reducing juvenile crime in Alaska? The initial evidence shows both promise and areas in need of more attention**. Referrals to the division of juvenile justice have declined 56% over the past 12 years (FY2003-FY2014)**, even though the overall population of Alaska youth (ages 12-17) has only fallen by 11% during that same time period. In conjunction with this change, the number of **admissions to DJJ facilities has been consistently declining between FY2003 – FY2014, with the average daily population declining by 33.2%** over this time period. These positive changes are believed due to many factors. The improvement of front-end services for youth, particularly through the “Bring the Kids Home” initiative for those with behavioral health needs, is believed to be a factor. The effort division staff have put into working with communities, school districts, and other partners to develop vocational, educational and other skill-building opportunities for youth also has undoubtedly been a contributing factor to declines in referrals. Partnerships between facility staff and schools, courts, local businesses and others also is believed to have contributed to reduced need for secure detention and treatment of youth. The division has moved to make **more efficient use of its facilities** as resources for their communities. For example, through the Community Detention program youth are referred to facilities to participate in day programs and community service but are not required to spend the night, avoiding unnecessary use of secure detention beds.

More attention and effort is needed to improve recidivism rates among juveniles with the most intensive needs, in particular those who have received formal probation supervision or been committed to care in secure treatment facilities. Recidivism rates (defined as re-offenses resulting in a new adjudication in the juvenile system or a conviction in the adult system within 2 years) for these youth have remained relatively unchanged over recent years. **The recidivism rate for juveniles released from *formal probation supervision* has stood at approximately 42% for the past five years; the recidivism rate of those released from *secure treatment* has remained at 62% over the same period. Of juveniles who recidivate, the vast majority (87%) do so after they have turned 18 and enter the adult correctional system**.

The division also is continuing its **work to reduce the disproportionate involvement of Alaska Native youth** with the juvenile justice system. **On the positive side, the division has seen a 45% reduction in referrals of Alaska Native youth over the period FY2003 – FY2014**. This decline is believed due, at least in part, to work conducted by DJJ staff to develop partnerships with tribal entities and rural Alaskan initiatives such as culture camps and other traditional activities that prevent future criminal involvement. However, the referral rate and the recidivism rate for Alaska Native youth remain higher than for other racial groups. The division remains committed to developing services, and partnerships that will reduce the disproportionate contact of Alaska Native youth with the juvenile justice system and prevent their involvement in the adult criminal justice system.