

Testimony before the Subcommittee on Crime,
Terrorism and Homeland Security

“Girls in the Juvenile Justice System:
Strategies to Help Girls Achieve Their Full Potential”



Testimony Provided By:

Thomas J. Stickrath, Director
Ohio Department of Youth Services

October 20, 2009



OHIO DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH SERVICES

Ted Strickland, Governor • Thomas J. Stickrath, Director

Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gohmert and members of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security:

My name is Tom Stickrath, and I am the Director of the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS). I have served in this role for 5 years after spending over 25 years managing various aspects of adult corrections. Whether it is in the adult prisons or juvenile facilities, female offenders present a particular set of challenges and rewards, and in many cases require more time and energy to manage within an institution.

In March 2009, the National Juvenile Justice Network (NJJN) published a paper stating what many practitioners who work with girls already knew: the current juvenile justice system is designed for male offenders. The report stated that "Most theories of juvenile delinquency are based on adolescent male behavior, and this has led to a set of juvenile justice policies that is tailored to boys. Girls in the juvenile justice system have unique emotional, mental and physical health needs which require gender-specific programs and services."

Criminologists continue to study the differences between males and females in their pathways to crime. Both boys and girls are impacted by the major risk factors of family problems, education/school problems, antisocial peers, antisocial attitudes/personality and substance abuse. However, girls differ in their reactions to sexual abuse and other maltreatment, family and other life stressors, attachment and bonding, relationship violence, depression and anxiety, peer victimization and early puberty.

The girls committed to DYS look similar to those across the nation involved in the juvenile justice system. Ninety-one percent are on the mental health caseload with 63 percent on psychotropic medications. Most have substance abuse issues, and over half have attempted suicide. While the average age of our female population is 16, the average school grade level is only 7th grade and 40 percent are in need of special education services. Physical, mental and/or sexual abuse is the norm for these girls, and nearly all have experienced some sort of trauma in their lives.

Ohio's Approach

My vision has been to reduce admissions of youthful offenders to large state institutions, consistent with public safety, and to build community capacity. By using research and data to equip courts with helpful information, youthful offenders are more likely to be placed in the environment most appropriate for rehabilitation. Low to moderate risk youth are diverted to community options when appropriate, and higher risk youth are served in larger DYS facilities. The collaborative efforts of our agency and Ohio's juvenile courts have supported a decrease in youthful offenders served in institutions. The population of girls in DYS was 129 in July 2006

but today is 45, a decrease of 65 percent, and the population of both girls and boys in DYS was 1,792 in July 2006 and today is 1,200, a decrease of 33 percent.

Recognizing the need for a consistent and validated approach to evaluating youth throughout their involvement in the juvenile justice system, Ohio sought and received funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to create an Ohio-indigenous assessment system so that juvenile courts in Ohio could speak a “common language.” DYS worked with the University of Cincinnati (UC), to develop the Ohio Youth Assessment System (OYAS) to create statewide consistency in the determination of treatment and level of supervision for juvenile offenders. I am pleased to report that the OYAS was normed and validated on both genders separately, and adjustments were made to develop a final set of parameters that incorporated the different needs of boys and girls.

The OYAS is comprised of validated tools that identify the youth’s risk and need areas so that an appropriate intervention can be determined. Over the past three years, UC has interviewed and collected follow-up data on 2,500 youth throughout the Ohio juvenile justice system. DYS, juvenile courts, community corrections facilities and various community programs also supplied insight and support to the project.

Although the DYS female population has been historically much smaller than our male population, we recognize that meeting the unique needs of this group is drastically different than the approach needed for boys. DYS has taken to heart the research and the lessons learned from working with the female population. When I took the position of Director five years ago, the girls’ facility was a different place. Allegations of abuse, lack of mental health treatment and scarce education plagued the facility. Over the past five years, we have worked tirelessly to change the milieu of the girls’ facility into one that is less penal, more structured and better prepared to effectively care for the particular challenges this population presents.

Employees in contact with girls, from the security staff to the cafeteria workers, participate in a two-day, research-based training developed by sociologists from the Girls Institute of Ohio. This training, called “Working Effectively with Girls,” provides facility staff with the basic demographics of the female population, the key elements of effective girls programming and strategies to enhance the services provided to girls.

Because of the amount of trauma that our youth have experienced, DYS has equipped staff with more effective ways of working with this population. Together with the Childhood Trauma Task group, we developed staff training on the prevalence and impact of trauma. This training also provides strategies for assisting these youth to cope and points out “traditional” correctional practices which have the potential to be re-traumatizing. Staff learn the symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, the impact of trauma on early brain development, intervention strategies to reduce the use of restraints and seclusion, how to create trauma informed care living environments on the units and how to use trauma sensitive tools to teach youth how to self-regulate their emotions.

Not only do the employees working with our female population learn about trauma, the girls do as well. In the program titled “Girls Trauma Recovery and Empowerment Model,” or G-TREM, girls learn how

current behaviors are linked to past abuses as well as basic skills in boundary maintenance and communication.

We have increased the staffing of our female facility in key areas including social workers and mental health staff. Staffing for female offenders reflects a clinician for every fifteen female offenders diagnosed with mental health needs.

All of the female units have comfort, or sensory, rooms. These therapeutic spaces are designed to serve as a quiet, safe and respectful place of retreat to help a youth calm down and avert a crisis. Sensory rooms are used for crisis de-escalation and also crisis prevention as youth learn safer and healthier ways to regain self-control.

We have also created a state-of-the-art mental health unit for girls which is richly staffed by a multidisciplinary team of mental health professionals. The unit is devoted to providing treatment to youth who have been diagnosed with significant mental illness that compromises their ability to reasonably function within the general population. While on the unit, girls participate in weekly individual sessions, group therapy and also family therapy. It is the goal of the unit to equip the youth with the skills necessary to appropriately engage in general population programming and eventually return to the community.

A major part of managing behavior within the institutions is using gender specific incentives. The females have five reinforcement categories that include verbal applause, Golden Ticket (based on the five pillars of citizenship from Character Counts), daily review (youth earn points for pro-social behavior), weekly shopping at the incentive store (items and activities are based on what has meaning to girls) and a monthly behavior party.

In the early part of 2010, we will implement a new, comprehensive, evidence-based and gender responsive treatment program for the female population. Using a treatment milieu, the programming will be grounded in cognitive-behavioral ideas and principles. The core programming will address issues such as domestic violence, emotional trauma, self-image and conflict management. Delivery will be consistent with a relational model of treatment and will involve all staff working on the unit.

A well planned community reentry strategy is critical for any offender returning home. The new female programming will work to strengthen each girl's practical life skills, career planning and reentry preparation.

Community Capacity

Although the work we do within our facilities to address the specific needs of girls is critical, the majority of girls in Ohio's juvenile justice system are not committed to DYS. Over 1,000 girls each year are adjudicated delinquent of a felony level crime in Ohio and even more are seen by the court on misdemeanors and status offenses. Females make up about 30 percent of the admissions to state funded community programs.

New programs are showing promise in working with girls in the community including the Behavioral Health / Juvenile Justice (BH/JJ) initiatives that have begun in Ohio. The BH/JJ

programs were created to enhance the community's ability to locally serve juvenile offenders with serious behavioral health needs by transforming the community's capacity to identify, assess, evaluate and treat multi-need, multi-system youth and their family.

Our first Community Based Treatment Center for males will open this month, and its cognitive-behavioral approach addresses criminogenic factors and provides aftercare with strong community linkages. We are currently developing a similar option for girls. In addition, we have committed to provide additional funds to Ohio's 6 largest courts that commit 63 percent of youth to DYS to support evidence-based and model programs. We anticipate that this initiative will decrease the commitments to DYS institutions by 189 youth.

Moving forward

Progress is being made on many fronts in Ohio, and across the nation, to address the needs of females in the juvenile justice system. However Ohio, like other states, has struggled to find appropriate methods of managing a very challenging population of juvenile offenders while balancing the multifaceted aspects of public safety, victims and rehabilitation. Jurisdictions across the country often create programs that may "feel good" but are not evidence-based and may not work.

We in Ohio are committed to offering safe, evidence-based programming for females that includes family involvement and other community resources. We need support from Washington to ensure that the programs being administered are not harmful to the youth involved but in fact yield the desired successful outcomes. With OJJDP funded research and program evaluation, states will not have to "reinvent the wheel" when establishing new programs for juvenile offenders. Supporting the research for evidence-based programs will, in the long run, work to save precious state and national resources, enhance public safety and provide effective interventions for juveniles who have committed delinquent acts.