

A Minnesota County Mentors Juveniles and Provides Reentry Services

By Jeffrey Bouffard, Kathleen Bergseth and Shelley Ford



“Anne” began using meth at the age of 16 and soon found herself involved with the juvenile justice system. She did not have much to look forward to in her life. Her father had his own chemical dependency (CD) issues and her mother had disappeared when she was 10 years old, leaving her in the care of her grandmother. Anne found it hard to trust any adult in her life and turned to drugs to ease the pain. At the age of 17, she was placed in CD treatment followed by a halfway house. Her probation agent referred her to a unique program — the Reentry Services Project (RSP) — to provide assistance during her transition home. Anne initially resumed living with her grandmother, but the two struggled as Anne was now 18 and wanted more independence than her grandmother was comfortable with. The RSP provided her a transitional coordinator (TC), who helped Anne obtain her GED, find a job, find her own apartment and obtain her driver’s license. Anne relapsed and lost her job but, with the assistance of her TC, she resumed attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings, connected with a sponsor and was soon “back on track.” Anne found a new job that she retains to this day. And, with the guidance of her TC, Anne went to counseling when she found herself in an abusive relationship. Anne, who participated in the RSP for eight months, continues to call her TC to ask for advice, guidance and mentoring, and she is currently working with her TC to research local higher education opportunities.

Anne’s history is similar to many youths who have experienced out-of-home placement in the juvenile justice system, but unique in the sense that she was given the opportunity to participate in the RSP. Clay County, Minn., is leading the field of reentry services for juvenile offenders. The county has formed the Clay County Joint Powers Collaborative, a partnership of multiple agencies and organizations working to address issues related to children/adolescents and their families. The collaborative has been implementing the RSP to address the need for aftercare services for high-risk juvenile offenders transitioning to their home communities from various types of out-of-home placement facilities (i.e., detention or treatment facilities). As early as 2003, the county recognized the need to provide transitional services for severely emotionally disturbed (SED) and violent youths transitioning from the local juvenile detention facility. The first response was to develop a TC position, a staff person paid by the collaborative to work with these juveniles as they left the local detention facility. The county quickly realized the need for a more formal and organized approach to juvenile reentry for these youths, as well as for youths coming from other out-of-home placements and youths transitioning from the detention center who were not SED and/or violent. The need for a comprehensive reentry program was demonstrated by the difficulty experienced by the county’s juvenile probation agents in providing an intensive level of case management services for offenders transitioning from out-of-home placement facilities. The challenges were a result of high caseload numbers, the rural nature of Clay County, various placement facilities’ distance from Clay County, and other job duties and responsibilities.

To address this recognized community need, representatives from probation, social services, law enforcement, restorative justice, and the Clay County Joint Powers Collaborative met to discuss gaps in programming in Clay County and develop a grant proposal to address the need for aftercare services. Grant funding was obtained from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety’s Office of Drug Policy and Violence Prevention, with match funding provided by the collaborative. The RSP has had continuous grant support from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety and the collaborative since 2003.

In response to these same kinds of issues — the need to provide comprehensive reentry services to various juvenile offender groups — many jurisdictions have implemented reentry service programs for juvenile offenders based either on the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI)¹ or the Intensive Aftercare Program (IAP)² models. Both of these approaches have been subjected to scientific evaluation and have produced promising results. Each model includes a three-phase design (planning and services begin in the facility, followed by assistance during transition, which is continued once participants are in the community); offender assessment; individualized case planning; overarching case management components; and the integration of treatment and supervision activities to reduce re-offending.

Grant funding allowed Clay County to add two full-time TCs to the traditional juvenile probation system and facilitate the combination of services and the community supervision functions of traditional probation. The Clay County program is unique, however, in that it also incorporates scientific knowledge related to the benefits of mentoring services for troubled youths. For example, evaluations of the federally-sponsored Juvenile Mentoring Program (JUMP)³ and the Aftercare for Indiana through Mentoring (AIM) program⁴ showed that mentoring services for youths involved in the juvenile justice system could improve outcomes by reducing aggression and delinquency. While the existing research suggested that the use of community-based (volunteer) mentors could help juvenile offenders transition to the community more effectively, the Clay County program is one of the first to incorporate paid professional staff as mentors and not simply as additional supervision agents or service brokers.

Program Reach

Juveniles returning to Clay County after having spent at least three weeks in some form of out-of-home placement (i.e., detention, treatment, foster care placement) are eligible for participation in the RSP. All juveniles in the RSP are on supervised probation and have an assigned probation agent. TCs from the RSP work in conjunction with probation agents to provide both surveillance and mentoring services to transitioning youths. In particular, TCs help ensure continuity in service from placement to the community and connect youths and their families to needed community-based services. Early on, the decision was made to house RSP staff at the local alternative learning center school building rather than within the juvenile probation office. This was done to provide autonomy for the program; underscore the distinction between probation services and the TCs, who also play a designated mentoring role; and allow for easy access to youths transitioning back to their community-based schools through the alternative learning center. In January 2004, an advisory committee was formed to oversee and provide guidance to the program. The committee of 24 meets quarterly and consists of nonprofit service providers, parents, and community partners from schools, law enforcement and social services.

Modeled after the SVORI and IAP initiatives, Clay County's program includes three phases. The first phase is placement, which involves services and reentry planning while the juvenile is still in out-of-home placement. During this phase, the TC is introduced to the youth and attempts to build a relationship through personal visits and telephone calls. The TC is also involved with service staff at the juvenile's placement facility and aids in treatment planning. In the second phase, reentry preparation, TCs are responsible for facilitating transition to the home community, investigating and arranging community services, providing support during transition, and developing individualized transitional plans. In the final phase, community-based services, TCs aid clients in accessing services in the community (e.g., establishing appointments, providing transportation); provide case management services; and serve as mentors. The program is designed to last approximately six months. Throughout the three phases, youths remain on probation and continue regular contacts with their probation agents.

In addition to these various planning, assessment, brokerage and supervision functions, a specific focus of the program involves TCs developing an informal mentoring relationship with youths. TCs attempt to meet with clients in a variety of settings, including home, school, work and the office for formal visits. TCs also attend support group sessions (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous), coordinate regular outings for groups of clients (e.g., bowling, dinners), and spend one-on-one time with clients in ways that interest them, including school tours, local plays, shopping and sporting events.

Evaluating Program Operation and Effectiveness

Given the program's unique feature of paid professional staff as mentors, program sponsors (the state of Minnesota and the Clay County collaborative) wanted to examine whether the program was meeting its goals. Specifically, sponsors were interested in knowing whether the program successfully provided enhanced services to high-risk youths and whether those enhanced services resulted in better outcomes, such as lower drug use and recidivism, for these juveniles. Beginning in 2004, program sponsors contracted with researchers from North Dakota State University, in neighboring Fargo, N.D., to conduct an external, objective evaluation of the operation and impact of the RSP.⁵ The results of that evaluation were positive and helped shape further refinements in the program over time. Specific components of the evaluation and its findings are described in the following sections.

Evaluation design overview. Sixty-three youths who had been served by the program between 2003 and 2005 were compared to 49 similar juveniles from a neighboring county that did not have the enhanced RSP. Analysis of census data showed that the two counties were largely similar to one another in the percent of the population younger than 18, median income and racial/ethnic composition. Traditional juvenile probation services were also comparable since both counties were located within the same district of the state's juvenile probation system

and therefore had similar assessment and supervision protocols and typically made use of the same set of out-of-home placement facilities. Data was collected from computerized juvenile court records for both groups. Additional detailed information related to enhanced reentry services provided by TCs to reentry participants was collected from paper files maintained by the TCs.

Sample. As expected, this sample of juveniles had extensive criminal histories, with more than 90 percent of each group experiencing at least one prior police contact (56 percent had at least one prior contact for a violent offense), and on average 5.6 prior contacts. The average age of the sample was 16.5 upon return to the community, and 72 percent of the sample was male. In terms of racial and ethnic background, the sample was approximately 40 percent white, 43 percent American Indian, 13 percent Hispanic and 4 percent African American. Forty-two percent of the sample had most recently been arrested for a property crime, 23 percent for a violent crime, and 35 percent for some “other” offense type (underage drinking, traffic offenses, disorderly conduct, etc). For the most part, the two groups were similar to one another; however, there were two statistically significant differences worth noting. Those in the reentry program were more likely to come from the small urban area in Clay County, and those from the comparison county had somewhat more extensive criminal histories. While these initial group differences could limit the ability to compare these two groups in terms of later recidivism and other outcomes, statistical controls were used to ensure credible comparisons between the two samples.

Key findings for program operations. Previous research on reentry services for adults and juveniles has revealed common difficulties in actually delivering the additional services that are intended as part of the reentry program. In light of this, the evaluation of the Clay County program began with a thorough examination of how services were delivered to RSP participants. Findings revealed that probation officers dealing with each group had comparable amounts of contact with each group of juveniles, their families and other agency partners; both groups did receive similar probation services, as anticipated. More important, TCs delivered a 292 percent increase in the number of contacts with the juvenile RSP participants, as well as a 137 percent increase in the number of contacts with the juveniles’ parents and a 65 percent increase in contacts with other agency partners on behalf of the RSP participants. While the RSP program is intended to last for approximately six months, the average participant was involved in the program for 7.2 months and received 46 hours of face-to-face contact with his or her TC, including

more than 40 separate contacts between each juvenile participant and TC. TCs also referred more than 90 percent of participants to at least one form of service in the community, including referring 68 percent to some form of education or occupational service and 44 percent to some form of pro-social activity/life skills program.

Key findings for program impact. The evaluation of the Clay County RSP also focused on short- and longer-term outcomes generated by the provision of the enhanced program services noted above. In particular, the evaluation examined whether juveniles participating in RSP had lower rates of positive drug tests while on supervision. In fact, RSP participants had only a 34 percent positive drug test rate, compared to more than 62 percent for those without enhanced reentry services. This significantly lower rate of positive tests occurred despite the fact that a significantly greater proportion of the RSP group actually received a drug test (74 percent) than did the comparison group (31 percent).

Participants in the RSP also showed improvement over time in their scores on a standardized risk screening tool (the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory or YLS/CMI). In particular, RSP participants who were administered the YLS/CMI while still in their placement facility scored 17 percent higher than when they completed the same tool approximately six months after they had been released to the community.

Finally, the evaluation of the Clay County program compared the recidivism rates of RSP participants to those in the comparison county during their first six months in the community. A series of multivariate statistical analyses was used to control for various demographic factors (i.e., age, race, gender) and initial group differences (i.e., criminal histories and percent from a small urban area vs. a more rural part of each county). Specifically, the evaluation looked at the time that elapsed between release to the community and the individual’s first reconviction, a technique known as survival analysis, and at any differences in the number of new convictions that juveniles in each group experienced. Youths served by the RSP were 42 percent less likely to experience a new criminal conviction during the six-month follow-up period, and they showed a marginally significant improvement in the length of time until their first criminal conviction compared to those in the comparison county where such services were not available; this measure excluded traffic, alcohol/tobacco and status-related offenses. RSP participants also experienced a smaller number of new convictions for all offense types, including new criminal offenses, traffic, underage possession of alcohol/tobacco, and other status-related offenses.

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Summary and Conclusions

The unique response of Clay County to the needs of juvenile offenders returning to the county after a period of out-of-home placement includes a combination of enhanced services — access to community resources — and supervision in the form of probation and TC contacts. Program staff successfully increased contact with youths, their families, and agency partners, and TCs also appear to have increased the rate of urinalysis drug testing. Mentoring relationships are the third major element of the program; TC time with clients was split between supervision-related office visits and mentoring activities that can include leisure activities, life skills training, educational endeavors and employment-related contacts. Evaluation results provide support for the benefits of mentoring in the transition process, whether in the form of volunteers (as supported by Roger Jarjoura, founder of Aftercare for Indiana through Mentoring⁶) or in the form of paid staff. Further, the results demonstrate that reentry programs can work, especially when their implementation includes a combination of services and supervision.

ENDNOTES

¹ Winterfield, L. and S. Brumbaugh. 2005. *Characteristics of prisoner reentry programs for juveniles*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.

² Altschuler, D. and T. Armstrong. 1994. *Intensive aftercare for high-risk juveniles: A community care model*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

³ Novotney, L.C., E. Mertinko, J. Lange and T.K. Baker. 2000. *Juvenile mentoring program: A progress review*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

⁴ Aftercare for Indiana through Mentoring. 2004. *Indiana's juvenile reentry program: Aftercare for Indiana through mentoring, annual report*. Retrieved April 25, 2006, from http://aim.spea.iupui.edu/AIM_annual_report.doc.

⁵ Bouffard, J. and K. Bergseth. 2008. The impact of reentry services on juvenile offenders' recidivism. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 6(3):295-318.

⁶ Aftercare for Indiana through Mentoring. 2004.

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