

Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force
BJJS Youth Development Center Roundtable
September 22, 2020

On September 22, 2020, the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force conducted a roundtable discussion with ten staff from a Youth Development Center (YDC) operated by the Bureau of Juvenile Justice Services (BJJS). The roundtable was facilitated by Jonathan Rubin, Deputy Secretary, Office of Children, Youth, and Families, Pennsylvania Department of Human Services and member of the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force.

➤ ***Strengths of the Juvenile Justice System:***

- **YDC has high quality educational and vocational services for youth:** One staff member said that vocational training is a strength and that they have improved reading comprehension for youth in their facility. Another staff person stated that the educational programming within their facility has elevated youth's test scores in reading and mathematics.
- **YDC has cognitive behavioral therapy for youth:** Staff said that they have high quality programming that provides cognitive behavioral therapy for youth in their facility. For example, staff mentioned programs like Forward Thinking, which focuses on youth's individual needs. Another staff member said that Thinking for a Change, another cognitive behavioral therapy, has been helpful with improving the social skills of girls in their facility. Staff believe that these cognitive behavioral therapies have been especially helpful for youth who have committed violent offenses.
- **There are more staff in the YDC:** Staff said that "the numbers were not in [their] favor a year ago" but that they are now closer to a "1 to 1" ratio (staff to youth) within the facility. One staff member said that the increase in the number of staff within the facility has allowed "kids to get a more focused and quality effort [by staff]." Another person said that the increase in staff "provides a better, safer environment for youth and staff."
- **Trainings on "staff safety" and "crisis management" have increased:** Staff said that there has been an increase in the amount of training on staff safety and crisis management. The increase in training has allowed for "therapeutic relationships with residents." Another staff member said that the increase in training has ensured that more quality staff are engaging with youth.

➤ ***Areas in Need of Improvement:***

- **Youth stay in the YDC for too long:** Staff expressed concerns over how long youth stay at the YDC. One staff member said that youth can be in a YDC "for two plus years" and that "delaying discharge for bad behavior" doesn't work. Another staff person believed that they should "shorten stays of kids if there is a viable option to release a kid to."
- **Youth experience multiple placements before entering YDC, resulting in poor outcomes:** Staff said that they "have kids that have been in five different placements before they get to [the YDC]." Another staff member stated that youth who are placed in multiple facilities have worse outcomes when they are discharged from the YDC.
- **Services in the community and in schools are lacking:** Staff report that youth often do not receive services in the community or schools before entering placement. One staff member stated, "A lot of services in the community or schools are not adequate." Another staff person said that "maybe if more work happens with kids who are younger they might be diverted from even coming into the system." Multiple staff said that youth end up in detention because of the

lack of services they receive in the community and once youth are in detention they receive little to no programming to help with their rehabilitation.

- **YDC placement for lower-risk youth leads to worse outcomes:** Staff expressed frustration that higher-risk youth, such as youth who have been charged as adults, are being held in the same facilities with lower-risk youth, leading to worse outcomes for the lower-risk youth in custody. Staff said that some counties are using YDCs as a place to hold youth who have adult charges pending. One staff member said that because these youth have adult charges pending they don't feel the need to engage in the programming within the YDC, which has a contaminating effect on younger and lower-risk youth. Another staff person said that these younger and lower risk youth are "impressionable" and look up to these more "criminal-minded kids" who have involvement in the adult system, which creates an "unsafe environment."
- **Case planning and treatment drop off when youth are released from the YDC and are under the supervision of juvenile probation:** Staff said that youth do not receive adequate case planning and treatment from juvenile probation when they leave the YDC. Staff specifically mentioned that aftercare planning needs to be improved because they have youth who leave the YDC and lose all of the progress they've made once they arrive back in the community. As one staff person said, "We can set up all the services for them before they leave, but after that it's up to the JPO. We're at the mercy of someone else to follow through."
- **Youth of color make up most of the youth in YDCs, indicating stark racial disparities in which youth are incarcerated:** Staff said that there were more youth of color in the facility as compared to white youth. One staff member stated that these racial disparities were understandable because of "where the youth are coming from, it's all from the cities in Pennsylvania and there's more diversity in the cities."
- **There is an influx of youth with mental health needs coming into the YDC:** Staff said that they are ill-equipped to serve the influx of youth who have numerous mental health needs and are being sent to their facility. According to staff, this influx is a result of private facilities refusing to accept and treat those youth who have a mental health issue. One staff member said that their facility does not have the training or resources to serve youth that are dealing with issues related to mental health. Another staff person said that some youth who "should be in the mental health system are stuck in the juvenile justice system...they get a charge and punitive stuff isn't good for them." A third staff member believed that youth who are dealing with a mental health issue "are not capable of getting out... [and that] it's just a revolving door."
- **Better communication with counties to identify appropriate youth for placement:** Staff expressed a need for "better communication between the facility and counties...[to] let [counties] know what [YDCs] do and how [they] do it." Staff said that counties "keep sending [them] kids" that are not appropriate for their facility. One staff person said that it would be helpful "if people in positions above [them], and above [their] directors, [were] involved in communication with counties to let them know what [YDCs] can and can't offer." Another staff member said that there needed to be someone who could "manage some of the communications between the courts and counties" so that the appropriate youth are referred to their facility.

➤ **Notable quotes:**

- **On having placement facilities closer to a youth's home:**
 - "No, I think it's better for kids to be out of the way, further from their environment. It's the same mentality as it is on the streets for them. I think it's better that they get out of that environment and get a different viewpoint just from being in a different place."

- “If a county like Philadelphia is going to abide by different rules than other counties, then they should have a facility further away, but should have all their kids in the same place.”
- **On treatment of youth of color and white youth:**
 - “As far as treatment of the individual, that’s not based on any physical trait. It’s not based on color. It’s based on their danger and their attitude on wanting to do better for themselves.”
- **On the creation of policies to improve the juvenile justice system:**
 - “The people writing policies have never been on the floor before. They’ve never interacted with these kids on a one on one basis.”