

Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force
BJJS Forestry camp Roundtable
September 17, 2020

On September 17, 2020, the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force conducted a roundtable discussion with six staff from a forestry camp operated by the Bureau of Juvenile Justice Services (BJJS). The roundtable was facilitated by Tara Piechowicz, the Deputy Secretary of Policy and Planning for Governor Tom Wolf).

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

- **Reentry service planning has improved:** Staff said that reentry services have improved significantly. One staff member commented, “We did not do a very good job five years ago of getting a youth resident ready to walk into a work place.” However, staff said that they have now “done a great job of making reentry transitions a priority statewide.”
- **Staff build relationships with youth and families:** Staff said that they do a good job of staying in touch with families and building relationships with youth. One staff member commented that they are “not looking at it as the kid’s in jail, but rather building a relationship – we rely heavily upon relationship building.”
- **Facilities now offer more services for youth:** Numerous staff commented that the forestry camp has done a better job of implementing evidence-based practices. One staff member said that “everyone’s on board with cognitive behavioral therapy.” Another staff member mentioned that the forestry camp has a lot more options for treatment than private facilities.
- **Staff education and retention:** Staff said that the education level of new staff has improved. They went on to say that new staff are identifying at risk behaviors and are more informed about treatment options. Staff also mentioned that public facilities have less staff turnover, which provides more consistency and structure for youth.

➤ ***Areas in Need of Improvement:***

- **Kids placed in BJJS custody due to mental health diagnoses better treated elsewhere:** Staff said that youth’s mental health issues lead to their involvement with the juvenile justice system. One staff member stated that a youth’s “delinquency is a result of their mental health.” Another staff person said that, “There’s many kids that wouldn’t be here at all if they had better treatment for their mental health. We’re definitely the catch all.” Staff stated that “there’s beds for a delinquent kid, there’s not beds for a mental health kid.”
- **It is common for youth to be held in secure detention for long periods before placement:** There were complaints from staff about the amount of time that youth have to sit in detention before being placed in a facility. One staff member said that “there’s no reason for a kid to be in detention for a month. And that’s not rare, that’s fairly common.” Another staff person commented, “Sometimes they’re in detention so long because they’re waiting for their adult case to process.”
- **Some counties sent a higher number of youth to placement:** One staff member said, “There’s some counties that are waiting for a kid to commit a crime so that they can put them in a bed.”
- **Staff see racial disparities in the juvenile justice system:** Staff said they have noticed and youth have made them aware of the racial disparities that exist throughout the state’s juvenile justice system. One staff member said, “[Black youth get] imprisoned by the white man, sentenced by the white man, and sent by the white man to go live in a forest.”

- **Services at the county level are often not assessed for effectiveness, leading to worse outcomes:** Staff said there are counties that assign programs and treatments that are likely harmful to youth and are not assessed for effectiveness. One staff member said that probation departments will know that a certain program or treatment is ineffective but will tell the youth that they “have to make this recommendation.” Staff mentioned that these ineffective programs and treatments are why recidivism is still high in certain counties. As one staff member said, “We’re putting residents back into an environment that possess a risk at relapsing, without additional support.”
 - **Privately-run facilities often lack services or provide services of poor quality:** Multiple staff had previously worked within private facilities and said that private facilities have fewer resources than state facilities. Staff also expressed concerns with the coordination of services and programming within private facilities. One staff member said that “in private facilities, if you have four counselors, you’ll have four different modalities, and it just doesn’t work.” Another staff person commented, “In private facilities, you don’t know what’s going on with any youth clients other than your own.”
- **Notable quotes:**
- On the need for more staff diversity:
 - “Trying to recruit diversity and maintain diversity is frustrating.”
 - On relationships with judges:
 - “We have relationships with the probation officers, not the judges.”