

Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force
Juvenile Probation Officers Roundtable
October 7, 2020

On October 7, 2020, the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force conducted a roundtable discussion with 36 juvenile probation officers (JPOs), including Probation Supervisors and Chief Juvenile Probation Officers. The roundtable was facilitated by two Task Force members, Richard Steele, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Juvenile Court Judges' Commission and Russell Carlino, chief juvenile probation officer for Allegheny County.

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

- **Use of the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI):** Multiple JPOs said that their use of the YLS/CMI has been helpful in “targeting the right kids and putting them in the right program.” JPOs also said that the YLS/CMI has been helpful in outlining what “goals and activities” should be included in a youth’s case plan to “address their needs.” Another JPO said that the YLS/CMI allows them to focus “in on the youth’s needs and [involve] the parents in identifying skill deficits” as a part of case planning.
- **Probation collects and uses data to improve and, when necessary, correct its practices:** JPOs believe that the collection and use of data has been a major strength of juvenile probation in Pennsylvania. One JPO said that juvenile probation is “much more data driven than [they’ve] ever been and [that juvenile probation is] not afraid to look at the data.” Another JPO said that their use of data has allowed them to recognize “when things aren’t working...for instance, a lot of [JPOs] appreciated school-based probation, but [after looking at the data they acknowledged] that it was increasing technical violations” and decreased the use of that practice.
- **Sharing of information and best practices among county probation departments:** Numerous JPOs said that the partnerships that exist amongst county probation departments has been helpful with the sharing of best practices. For example, one JPO said that it has been helpful when another county who “might be further ahead [shares] what they’ve done” so that other counties “can learn from them.”
- **Leadership from statewide organizations:** Nearly all JPOs praised the leadership from statewide organizations such as the Pennsylvania Juvenile Court Judges’ Commission, the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers and the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts. JPOs said that the leadership from these organizations has allowed for counties to successfully implement the Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy. According to JPOs, these statewide organizations have also helped with the sharing of resources and increased the use of data collection.

➤ ***Areas in Need of Improvement:***

- **Youth are charged in adult criminal court—including some for their first offense—when the juvenile justice system is better served to work with them:** Numerous JPOs believe that there are too many youth who are directly filed to adult criminal court and that the juvenile justice system is better equipped to serve these youth who are sent to the adult system. One JPO said that many of the youth who are directly filed to adult criminal court are youth with no prior history of offending who end up sitting in prison “for months” before they are decertified and sent back down to juvenile court. “That time period, I just don’t understand it,” he said. “They’re sitting there for months before they come into our system. They should just start in our system.” Another JPO said that “raising the age of [juvenile court] jurisdiction is in line with what we know [about adolescent brain development].” One JPO believes that the juvenile justice

system would not be overloaded if youth were no longer charged as adults because “time is right caseload-wise” for the state to “make a push to [raise the age of juvenile court jurisdiction] and get these [youth] back to where they belong, where they can get services and treatment.”

- **A more consistent and expedited juvenile expungement process for youth:** Many JPOs said that the juvenile expungement process should be improved. One JPO said that juvenile expungement fees are too burdensome and prohibit youth from expunging their juvenile record. Other JPOs said that the five year requirement to expunge some juvenile records is too long and that the statutory requirements for expungement in general should be reduced to make it easier for a youth to expunge their juvenile record. One JPO proposed making expungement automatic. Nearly all JPOs said that the expungement process needs to be more uniform across the state. As one JPO stated, “[the expungement process] is really varied from county to county, jurisdiction to jurisdiction—I’d like to see some uniformity.”
- **Many youth who have mental health needs or are victims of abuse/neglect/dependency end up in the delinquency system because other systems won’t work with them:** One participant stated that the child welfare is “too eager” to decrease its congregate care cases simply by sending victims of abuse/neglect/dependency to the juvenile justice system. A JPO said youth with mental health diagnoses or other needs often end up in the juvenile delinquency system, where JPOs struggle to address those needs. One said “a lot of mental health issues are going untreated” in the commonwealth, adding that “the RTFs aren’t accepting our kids, so we’re looking at placing them but are trying to find a suitable placement for them. I’ve struggled with that a lot.” As one JPO stated, “our state secure care shouldn’t be the de facto mental health placement.”
- **Schools are often quick to exclude youth who are on probation and do not work with juvenile probation to rehabilitate youth:** JPOs said that schools provide little to no help with the rehabilitation of youth while they are on probation. One JPO commented, “They don’t want to work with our kids, they’re quick to put our kids into alternative school settings, they don’t want to welcome them back after they’ve served some sanction for behavior. They want to throw away the kids we’re working with.”
- **Judges and district attorneys in some areas still do not understand the research behind probation practices, leading to decision-making sometimes misaligned with evidence:** One participant stated that they “still have some work to do to get judges and the DAs to understand all the things we’re involved in to balance community safety and long-term behavior enhancement.”
- **Coordinating treatment with Children and Youth Services (CYS) is difficult when dealing with youth in the juvenile justice system who are also victims of abuse, neglect, or dependency:** JPOs said that it is difficult when coordinating services with CYS for youth who have involvement in both the child welfare and juvenile justice system. One JPO said that they should be working hand in hand with CYS but that has not been possible because of the amount of staff turnover within the CYS office. Another JPO said that there needs to be more guidance that outlines the specific roles of both CYS and juvenile probation when providing treatment for youth who have involvement in both systems.

➤ **Notable quotes:**

- **On serving victims of juvenile crimes:**
 - “[We are committed] to victims and making sure they’re prepared the best they can...they’re part of the process at every stage of the juvenile justice system in Pennsylvania.”

- **On training of juvenile probation officers:**
 - “The quality of training has been phenomenal, as far as the hands-on approach throughout the training, the peer to peer feedback, the QA, the structure has been a great help for me as a PO. It made it much easier for me to come into the field as a new PO. The quality of the training all around has been great.”
- **On fostering relationships between law enforcement and youth:**
 - “Real challenge to figure out when and where to host those forums to get kids and law enforcement together.”
- **On how trauma impacts youth involvement with the juvenile justice system:**
 - “We deal with trauma across the system, we’re still missing the boat on that. Trauma changes the brain, how people react, how they interact in situations.”
- **On increasing diversion opportunities outside the juvenile justice system:**
 - “To make our [juvenile delinquency] system more healthy, we need to make sure other systems that promote prevention and diversion are healthy as well.”