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Responsible Public Policy

The Department of Youth Services (DYS) touches the lives of thousands of youth in Ohio. Beyond youth in DHS facilities and those on parole, DHS funds and supports over 610 direct service programs throughout the state offering nearly 110,000 youth (based on annual program admissions) opportunities and services to effect positive change.



Serving Youth with Mental Health Needs

Youth committed to DHS present a variety of complexities, including a significant need for mental health services. Many of our youth have multiple disorders that began in childhood and will last into adulthood. At times, youth who arrive at DHS are receiving their first opportunity to receive behavioral health treatment.

Currently, about half of all youth in DHS facilities are on the mental health caseload. A number of these youth are served in our mental health units, which provide more intense mental health services. Oftentimes the behavioral health needs of youth are challenging to address in the current system.

Consider Youth "Sam" whose true story follows. Sam comes from a family with a history of mental illness, sexual abuse and foster placement. A judge originally sentenced Sam to treatment in a group home after he committed a sex offense, but when he ran away, the judge sent him to DHS.

Sam was placed on a mental health unit at DHS, and despite staff's efforts, Sam was not able to respond to the treatment or medication provided. He began to worsen, and staff worked hard to get Sam placed in an intensive mental health unit associated with a large university. Youth Specialists provided 24/7 security for Sam while clinicians provided more specialized treatment than was available at DHS.

There are many others like Sam whose mental health needs are beyond the agency's capacity to provide needed stabilization and treatment. As the state juvenile correction system, DHS was not designed to meet this level of behavioral healthcare. Likewise, inpatient and outpatient mental health settings have not been designed to handle criminality and aggression.

In September 2011, Governor Kasich appointed me the chairperson of the Ohio Interagency Task Force on Mental Health and Juvenile Justice. The Task Force was established in statute to make recommendations on how to most effectively respond to delinquent youth who have serious mental illness or emotional and behavioral disorders and who end up in the juvenile justice system. The Task Force met over the last ten months and delivered their recommendations to the Governor, General Assembly and Supreme Court last month.

The overall conclusion of the Task Force is that there is a significant percentage of Ohio youth who need behavioral health services but whose problems and service needs are not being met. As a result, one of the unintended consequences of not addressing these needs at the community level is creating a disproportionate number of youth with serious emotional disturbances in the juvenile justice, child welfare and education systems.

The report and the recommendations call for an effective and integrative system of care where the systems that may impact youth and their families, work collaboratively to develop and improve the earlier identification of mental health needs and the service delivery and financing of systems and services responsive to the needs of youth.

In February 2012, members from the Task Force visited the mental health units at Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility and found that staff are delivering mental health treatment well despite the limitations of a correctional environment. The Task Force worked closely and collaboratively with families and many stakeholder groups to develop recommendations that address the challenges that many systems of care and communities face in working with children, youth and young adults involved or at risk of involvement with the juvenile justice system. The recommendations demonstrate the importance of true collaboration in financing, improving and monitoring a comprehensive array of services and supports and fostering positive outcomes for this population.

This is a serious issue, and I appreciate the time and expertise the Task Force members invested in helping our young people. We will continue our work to improve how we respond to the needs of this population of youth. For more information and to read the Task Force's recommendations, please visit our website at www.dys.ohio.gov and click on "Mental Health and Juvenile Justice Task Force" under "Featured Links".

