The Department of Youth Services (DYS) touches the lives of thousands of youth in Ohio. Beyond youth in DYS facilities and those on parole, DYS funds and supports over 680 direct service programs throughout the state offering more than 124,000 youth (based on annual program admissions) opportunities and services to effect positive change.

Across the country, minority youth are overrepresented in every phase of the juvenile justice continuum—from arrest and detention to adjudication and sentencing. As youth become more deeply involved in the justice system, the disproportions in youth being tried and sentenced in adult court are even greater.

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Act of 2002 requires that states examine possible disproportionate representation of minority youth at all decision points along the juvenile justice system continuum. The act further requires intervention strategies that are to include not only juvenile delinquency prevention efforts, but also system improvement efforts to reduce the disproportionate number of minority youth that come in contact with the juvenile justice system.

DYS is committed to a system that treats all youth fairly and that works to reduce racial and ethnic disparities. Last month marked the fourth anniversary of our Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) initiative, seeking to reduce overrepresentation of minority youth in the juvenile justice system through the development and implementation of a model of community capacity building and systems change to address issues around DMC.

The agency has partnered with Ohio’s 14 counties with the largest minority youth populations (Allen, Butler, Clark, Cuyahoga, Franklin, Hamilton, Lorain, Lucas, Mahoning, Montgomery, Richland, Stark, Summit and Trumbull) to address DMC. These 14 counties make up over 85% of Ohio’s minority population.

Currently more than 20 DMC projects are being funded, including a variety of program types such as mentoring, wraparound, diversion and alternatives to detention. This approach is expected to impact the treatment of youth at each decision point of the juvenile justice system, from arrest and detention, through case disposition and length of stay in the system (probation, incarceration and parole).

In Fiscal Year 2011, DYS contracted with the University of Toledo (UT), which facilitated five DMC institutes. Presentations addressed justice practices and cultural issues, mental health, law enforcement, school resource officers and families/stakeholders. Over the next year, UT will provide a second round of DMC institutes to assist community programs working with minority youth and provide creative strategies for sustaining programs.

The Ohio State University’s Center for Learning Excellence has been assisting with data collection, training, providing technical assistance and evaluating the funded projects. Preliminary results indicate that community DMC efforts have a positive impact on the youth served in these programs. The agency is committed to continue collection of statewide data and evaluation to support the reduction of DMC.