Family Involvement is Key

Family involvement is a critical key at all stages of juvenile justice. From arrest to community diversion, placement within a facility, reentry, and parole supervision, by partnering with families and involving them in decisions about their youth, better outcomes can be achieved. With this in mind, DYS has been emphasizing family involvement in order to help youth maintain, and in some cases rebuild, strong support systems.

The agency is reaching out to family members before their youth ever come to DYS. Parole staff provide local juvenile courts with a “Parent Resource Guide” to help families understand what to expect for those youth who are committed to a DYS facility. This guide includes information on intake, facilities, the release process, and parole services. The courts are also encouraged to share virtual tour videos, available at www.YouTube/OhioDYS, to help family members understand more about the facilities and services offered.

In 2015, DYS opened family visitation to family members seven days a week at all facilities. The expansion has been a success, especially given that many parents and guardians work on weekends. In general, youth who have already graduated from school can visit with family during the earlier part of the day or evening. For youth who are still students, family members can visit during evening hours and also during earlier hours on weekends.

The CLOSE to Home Project (Connecting Loved Ones Sooner Than Expected) provides free transportation to family members who may not otherwise be able to visit youth while they are incarcerated. In 2016, DYS provided a total of 69 bus trips to 535 passengers. Trips that coincide with school graduations and holidays have been especially popular. Juvenile parole officers also assist by transporting family members to facilities, special events involving the youth, and interdisciplinary team meetings.
When in-person attendance is not possible, parole staff use the “Video Communicator Project” to promote family involvement using laptops and wireless technology, similar to Skype. In 2016, the Video Communicator was used for 109 family visits, 176 reentry meetings, and 311 staff meetings (between facility and parole staff) regarding youth.

At one juvenile correctional facility, Cuyahoga Hills, staff heard repeatedly from youth concerned about their family members, younger siblings in particular, not having enough food to eat at home. The staff there created a food pantry and on an ongoing basis, donate items to help families of youth. Youth have been contributors as well by giving their personal snacks to the food pantry. In December 2016, facility and parole staff teamed up to deliver more than 40 large canvas bags of food to assist families in need.
Not all youth have family support systems in place. In order to help these youth, parole staff are using “Family Finding,” a technology to link disconnected youth with a support network. Staff look for extended family members through a research process that includes online searches. In 2016, parole staff used Family Finding to connect youth to 5 family members.

The agency’s efforts are making a difference. Youth A explained that when his brother died unexpectedly during his incarceration, staff at Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility were there to assist him and his family. His former Juvenile Parole Officer David Vancleave said, “Before DYS, he took his family for granted, but he was able to reconnect with his family because of his DYS stay.”

A 90-year-old great grandfather of a youth at Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility wrote a letter to staff to “express appreciation for all the kindness shown to my wife and me during our frequent visits.” He went on to write, “There was not one time that we were not graciously and courteously received by every person whom we met.”

Some of the youth at DYS, approximately 13%, are themselves fathers. The Just Beginnings - Baby Elmo Program, at all three juvenile correctional facilities, provides a parenting and structured visitation program to build bonds between children and their dads. This is important because research indicates that the absence of a father figure has been linked to poor developmental outcomes. Activities focus on hands-on learning and building a relationship between the teen and his child, rather than just talking about parenting.
A youth and his son in a Baby Elmo room

The Baby Elmo Reentry Program, a joint effort of the Healthy Fathering Collaborative, Just Beginnings, and the Council of Neighborhood Leaders, serves youth returning to Cuyahoga County or who have children in Cuyahoga County. Program providers get linked with youth as early as possible to support them in positive relationships with their young children as they return home. In addition, the providers help with additional reentry needs and even offer assistance to the mothers of the young children.

DYS is also committed to reducing teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and risky sexual behavior among adolescents. The agency oversees the PREP (Personal Responsibility and Education Program) grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The program helps educate youth within Ohio’s juvenile justice and child welfare systems to reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection rates among these high-risk populations.

The Ohio Commission on Fatherhood received a federal grant to serve DYS youth between the ages of 16-24, returning to Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, Dayton, and Springfield, who meet program criteria. The goal is to help youth become more effective and nurturing parents, improve their long-term economic stability, and build strong, lasting relationships with their children. Participating fathers receive job training, parenting classes, and healthy marriage and relationship education.

We are continuing to build family engagement efforts. Feedback from family members, through focus groups and surveys, will provide valuable insight into improvements that can be made. We plan to begin family therapy sessions to help youth in the facilities along with their immediate family members. To promote family involvement in youths’ education, each facility will host a “Bring Your Parent to School Day,” which will provide a chance to showcase youths’ hard work in the classroom and give teachers and parents time together.

All youth leave the care of DYS by age 21. Most of the time, they return to families. Helping youth change their lives, and involving their families every step of the way, ultimately leads to safer communities.