A new program at DYS seeks to equip youth with skills that foster resiliency, emotional regulation, healthy communication, and prosocial problem solving.

In early June, a total of 24 staff, including behavioral health and case management, trained in SPARCS: Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress.

Sarah Book, Chief of Behavioral Health Services, explains: “It is incumbent upon us as a DYS family to acknowledge the adversities and chronic stress experienced by our youth and then provide a meaningful solution. With the implementation of SPARCS, we are taking a strong step in that direction.”

The SPARCS program aims to help youth, including those with a history of trauma, manage stress and increase resiliency. The broad goals of SPARCS treatment are to help youth grasp the four C’s:

1) Connect with others (communicate)
2) Cope more effectively in the moment
3) Cultivate awareness
4) Create meaning

The SPARCS model is a phase-oriented treatment with the first priority being to equip youth with tools for coping with current and future stressors that are impacted by painful events from
the past. Led by at least two facilitators, treatment includes 16 group sessions that last about an hour each. Groups kicked off at all facilities last week.

Gregory Tackach, Social Worker at Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility, explains: “SPARCS uses a hands-on approach. Each lesson has a fun activity to correspond with the skill being taught. Once youth see there are activities that involve movie clips and other activities, I expect they will ‘buy-in’ to the material and look forward to the group sessions.”

Benefits for staff:
- An evidence-informed approach for helping youth
- Engaging curriculum
- Less conflict with youth
- Improved communication

Benefits for youth:
- Manage stress in healthy ways
- Handle volatile emotions
- Improved relationships & communication

Elizabeth Matera is a Psychology Assistant at Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility. She says the treatment could be valuable for any of the youth at DYS because incarceration brings with it stressors like separation from family, limited choices, and living with other youth.

“They are all dealing with some sort of stress. Many young people don’t know how stress affects us, and they don’t have the coping skills needed to handle stress in a positive way,” she says. “SPARCS stresses the importance of mindfulness, staying in the here and now. It helps with their anger, providing skills they can practice now on the units and when they go home.”