

Qualitative Program Assessment
Arkansas Juvenile Assessment & Treatment Center

June 24-27, 2014

Conducted by: Darryl Olson,
Juvenile Corrections Consultant

Date: July 9, 2014

Method and Scope

A “Qualitative Program Assessment” was conducted at the Arkansas Juvenile Assessment & Treatment Center (AJATC) on June 24-27, 2014. The assessment was designed to evaluate the program based on factors that have proven to be effective in limiting the use of physical intervention with youth and creating a safer and more effective program environment. Indicators have been established for evaluating program performance related to each factor. Assessment instruments were designed to measure program performance related to each indicator.

The Arkansas Juvenile Assessment & Treatment Center has an operational capacity of one hundred (100) youth. The program was operating at full capacity during the assessment. The census included 87 boys and 13 girls.

The assessment methodology included a review of relevant documents, interviews with youth and staff and personal observation. Thirty seven (37) youth and five (5) “direct care” staff and supervisors were interviewed. Boys were selected randomly from each living unit. All of the (13) girls were interviewed. Interviews also included the Facility Administrator, Assistant Facility Administrator, Clinical Director, Case Management Supervisor, Human Resources Director, Staff Development and Training Director and Youth Advocate. Approximately eighteen (18) documents were reviewed including the Youth Handbook, Youth Grievances, Controlled Observation Reports, Incident Reports, Physical Intervention (HWC) Incident Reports, “Speak Out” Requests, Facility Statistical Reports, and a variety of operating procedures including, but not limited to, Behavior Motivation, Incident Reporting, Employee Recruitment and Selection, Employee Standards of Conduct, Staff Development and Training, Professional Ethics, Youth Rights, and Controlled Observation.

Findings and Recommendations

Findings were based on an assessment of indicators related to the following qualitative factors.

Behavior Management. *Effective behavior management is critical in maintaining a safe and secure environment. The indicators used to assess the program's behavior management system are established in the "Principles of Effective Behavior Management" that have been researched and published by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice.*

The existing behavior management system is defined in AJATC Policy 15-1, "Behavior Motivation System" dated 10/25/07. The policy meets most of the basic requirements but could be implemented more consistently. Case Managers are responsible for implementing the Behavior Motivation Program within their respective units. Each unit is managed differently with respect to the type, and frequency, of incentives that are used to promote positive behavior. All of the youth interviewed believe that staff are inconsistent in responding to rule violations, particularly minor violations such as cursing and horseplay. More serious violations are referred to a "Special Treatment Team" where youth have an opportunity to explain their behavior and provide input into the consequence(s) that will be imposed. Most of the youth believe the process is fair. Others believe that decisions are made in advance without considering their input or the circumstances of the violation. The Behavior Motivation Program appears to be generally effective with a majority of the youth but has not been as effective with a segment of the population that has been the most disruptive.

A variety of interventions have been implemented to assist youth in meeting their individual treatment needs as well as assist them in developing the skills that are needed to achieve success. A majority of the youth interviewed believe that those interventions are helping them develop important "coping" skills. However, some do not. Again, the interventions that have been implemented appear to be effective with a majority of the youth but have not been as effective with a segment of the population that has been the most disruptive.

Opportunities for Program Enhancement

- Revise AJATC Policy 15-1, "Behavior Motivation Program" to include the "*Principles of Effective Behavior Management*" researched by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. Staff are more likely to embrace the Behavior Motivation System and apply it with fidelity when they understand the underlying principles.
- Revise AJATC Policy 04-03, "Employee Training Requirements" to include the principles of effective behavior management.
- Establish a procedure for ensuring consistent application of the Behavior Motivation Program. Consistent application is essential for ensuring program integrity and effectiveness.
- Establish a procedure for evaluating the effectiveness of the Behavior Motivation Program based on an ongoing assessment of key performance indicators.

Indicators should include, but not be limited to, the number and rate of physical interventions, program disruptions and youth behavior reports.

- Implement at least 1 evidence-based intervention that is specifically designed to develop critical thinking and decision making skills. The “Thinking for a Change” curriculum is one option to consider.
- Establish a procedure for reviewing all treatment interventions to ensure they are delivered with fidelity.
- Train “direct care” staff on the basic principles of all treatment interventions including guidelines for reinforcing those interventions during their daily interaction with the youth. Revise policy to promote ongoing compliance and accountability.
- Train all staff to recognize and reward positive behavior during their daily interaction with youth. Facility supervisors and managers should model reinforce and reward youth recognition. Revise policy to promote ongoing compliance and accountability.
- Consider engaging the services of a Certified Behavior Analyst (CBA) to assist in developing a Behavior Motivation Program that will more effectively serve youth that are not responding to the current program.
- Consider establishing a “Behavior Management Unit” to segregate the most disruptive youth from the general population and provide them with the specialized services that are needed to effectively manage their behavior. The unit should be designed and implemented with the assistance of a Certified Behavior Analyst. Youth should be returned to the general population when they have achieved their BMU performance goals.

Staff and Youth Interaction. *The relationship that exists between staff and youth largely defines the culture of a program. Relationships that are based on professionalism and respect almost always result in a safer environment and more positive outcomes for youth.*

Expectations regarding staff interaction with youth are clearly articulated in a number of G4S policies. G4S Policy 3-3, “Employee Standards of Conduct and Performance” establishes three (3) types of “offenses” based on the level of severity. The policy includes five (5) “critical” offenses that are directly related to staff interaction with youth. Expectations regarding staff interaction with youth are also stated in the G4S Employee Handbook. All of the staff interviewed appears to understand G4S standards of conduct related to their interaction with the youth.

Responding timely and appropriately to youth issues and concerns is critical in establishing a positive program environment. AJATC has established a number of

practices that are designed to address youth issues. Case Managers and Therapists are housed in the living units where they can be immediately available to the youth. A practice referred to as "Speak Out" allows youth to speak to a particular staff member depending on the nature of their concern. A Grievance Procedure has been established to address formal complaints. All of the youth interviewed were familiar with these practices and believe they have been generally effective in addressing their personal concerns.

The use of physical intervention with youth is a key factor in defining the "culture" of a program. Physical intervention impedes the development of a positive relationship between staff and youth that is essential in creating an environment where treatment can be effective. A large majority of the physical interventions that were reviewed did not initially involve a response to violent or aggressive behavior. Rather, they began with non-compliant behavior that escalated into a physical confrontation between the youth and staff. These interventions can easily be avoided.

Controlled Observation is used to remove youth from the general population when their behavior becomes a threat to program safety. Placement in Controlled Observation is often preceded by a physical intervention. 36 incidents involving the use of Controlled Observation were reported during the period 4/01/14 through 5/31/14. A review of Controlled Observation Reports revealed that placements met criteria and had been properly reviewed and approved. The reports also indicated that youth were properly removed from CO when their behavior was under control. Interviews with youth were consistent with the written documentation. Most placements did not exceed 30 minutes.

All of the information gathered during the assessment process indicates that the youth's basic needs are being met. All of the youth interviewed responded that they feel safe in the program.

Opportunities for Program Enhancement

- AJATC should re-evaluate where the Youth Advocate is assigned within the operational chain of command in order to protect the integrity of the position.
- The Youth Advocate should review all incidents involving the use of physical intervention including a personal interview with the youth involved as well as any youth and staff witnesses. Issues regarding staff performance should be immediately referred to the Facility Administrator. Policy should be established to promote ongoing compliance and accountability.
- A comprehensive plan should be developed to reduce the frequency of physical intervention. The plan should be developed with input from all areas of operation as well as the youth. Measurable goals and objectives should be established and closely monitored by the Facility Administrator. Staff and youth should be recognized for achieving expected performance outcomes.

- All staff should be trained, or re-trained, in the cause and effects of adverse childhood experiences (trauma) particularly as it relates to the use of physical intervention. Policy should be established to promote ongoing compliance and accountability.
- The program should re-consider the current practice of assigning male (direct care) staff to the girls (WINGS) unit.
- Guidelines for conducting youth surveys and personal interviews should be established in policy. The policy should define the type of surveys to be used, how they are to be administered, as well as how the results will be used to address youth concerns and improve program operations.
- Practices that are providing youth an opportunity to voice personal issues and concerns should be established in policy.

Staff Competency. Working with youth who often have a variety of highly specialized treatment needs requires specific skills and abilities that may not be as critical in other professions. Staff that do not have the requisite skills are generally ineffective and often create problems that undermine the development of a positive program culture.

Determining whether particular staff members are properly suited to be working with youth was beyond the scope of the Qualitative Program Assessment. Rather, the assessment focused on existing policy and practice for considering “core competencies” in the recruitment and selection process, as well as evaluating policy and practices related to staff development.

G4S Policy 3-16, “Employee Recruitment and Selection” requires that an applicant’s “knowledge”, “skills”, “abilities” and “fitness for duty” (KSAF) shall guide the recruitment and selection process. KSAF’s are assigned to every position.

G4S Policy 3-39, “Employment Service, Recognition and Referrals” includes an impressive array of performance incentives that are directly related to staff interaction with the youth. Staff appear to be highly motivated by the process for recognizing their positive performance.

All of the youth interviewed believe that a large majority of the staff sincerely care about them and want them to succeed. However, they also believe that some staff are less committed to their treatment and rehabilitation than others. A number of the youth, girls in particular, feel that some staff treat them more like adults than juveniles.

Opportunities for Program Enhancement

- Position descriptions for “direct care” positions should be reviewed to ensure that core competencies reflecting the vision and goals of the program have been properly identified.

- A Recruitment Plan should be developed to target applicants with the desired core competencies.
- The selection process should be weighted toward applicants with experience in providing treatment and rehabilitation.
- The top applicant for “direct care” positions should be personally interviewed by the facility Administrator before a hiring decision is made.

Program Goals and Objectives. *Establishing a set of well-defined program performance standards and related outcome measures that are specifically designed to establish and support a positive and safe environment promotes positive and sustainable outcomes for youth.*

Opportunities for Program Enhancement

- A comprehensive plan for program development should be established that includes, but is not limited to, the development of a stronger and more effective program culture. The plan should include a well-defined set of performance standards and indicators that are both relevant and measurable. Performance outcomes should be closely monitored. Staff and youth should be involved in the development of the plan and rewarded for their work in achieving performance expectations.
- The process for creating, and maintaining, a comprehensive plan for program development should be established in policy.

Other Findings and Considerations

The scope of this Qualitative Program Assessment was expanded to include a file review of twelve (12) youth who have been identified as responsible for a majority of recent incidents involving disruptive behavior. The results of that review are as follows:

- 50 percent of the youth have been assessed as having a primary treatment need targeting violent or aggressive behavior.
- 92 percent of the youth have a history of at least 1 prior residential placement.
- 50 percent of the youth have a history of more than 1 prior residential placement.
- None of the youth have been assessed as having an “extraordinary disability”.
- None of the youth have been assessed as requiring developmental disability services.

- 83 percent of the youth have a full scale IQ and GAF score that is within the range of what would normally be expected of a justice involved population.
- 2 of the youth appear to be relatively low functioning and should be re-evaluated to determine if specialized services are needed.

Youth with a history of multiple residential placements will often be more difficult to serve. However, that does not necessarily mean that they are inappropriately placed. That determination should be made based on a clinical assessment of a youth's individual treatment needs compared to the array of services that are available to meet those needs.