

Not-For-Profit Agencies Play Key Role in New York's Juvenile Justice System

Much attention has been placed recently on New York's state-operated juvenile justice facilities. Not-for-profit agencies also play a key role in the system. Private agencies serve hundreds of youth, and their families. They serve youth who

- are at risk of entering the juvenile justice system,
- are returning from placement to the community, and
- are placed by the courts.

This article features the crucial role of these agencies in the juvenile justice system and the services they provide.

Youth at risk of placement and youth returning to the community from placement:

Many youth who commit what would be a crime if they were adults, are arrested, go to Family Court, and are adjudicated juvenile delinquents (JDs). The most appropriate outcome for many – but not all – of these youth is to remain in their communities, with their families, and receive services in high quality programs. The community based not-for-profit agencies provide these services for most of the JDs who remain in the community, including evidence-based programs that have demonstrated, through rigorous evaluations throughout the country, better outcomes for the youth and their families when compared with control groups, and at a fraction of the cost of out-of-home placement. Many of these programs are also provided to youth and their families after they return home to their families and communities from placement.

The evidence-based programs provided by the private agencies include intensive work by specially trained staff with youth and their families on almost a daily basis for a few months. These programs include:

- Family functional therapy (FFT), proven to: reduce the rate of placement of delinquent youth into more restrictive, higher cost services; prevent youth from entering the adult criminal system; and even prevent younger children in the family from needing additional services.¹
- Multisystemic Therapy (MST)², which has consistently been found to significantly decrease long-term rates of re-arrest and out-of-home placement. Demonstrated outcomes also include increased school attendance and family functioning, and decreased adolescent psychiatric symptoms and adolescent substance use.
- Multi-dimensional treatment foster care (MTFC) provides specially trained foster parents who care for one youth at a time, near the youth's home community, while staff work

¹ *Blueprints for Violence Prevention*, Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado at Boulder. www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/modelprograms/FFT

² Multisystemic Therapy Services, 2007. www.mstservices.com/research_on_effectiveness.php

intensively with the birth family to facilitate the youth's return home. MTFC has proven to reduce participation in violent criminal activity, reduce arrests, and reduce time spent in locked settings (detention, training schools, hospitals, etc.)³

Private agencies also provide services that, while not yet rigorously evaluated, show promising results. These include after school and evening supervision centers, etc. When the economy improves, it would be a smart long-term investment for federal and state governments to fund evaluations of promising practices to advance our knowledge about what works and guide future investment strategies.

Youth placed by the courts: The private not-for-profit agencies care for and treat youth whom the courts have decided need out-of-home placement. In 2009, there were about 750 juvenile delinquents placed in residential care with private agencies.⁴ These youth remain in the legal custody of the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) while physically residing in the private agencies.

The private agencies' residential programs are located throughout the State and differ significantly from the "juvenile jails" that many people picture when they hear about the juvenile justice system. The private agencies are not locked or surrounded with razor wire, and have a long-standing treatment and rehabilitation focus. All of the agencies provide mental health services with highly trained mental health professionals including psychiatrists, psychologists, and masters level social workers. This is critical, given the significant number of youth who come into placement with serious mental health and substance abuse issues, often as a result of trauma they have experienced, including physical and sexual abuse, neglect, violence in their communities, exposure to gang activity, and/or insufficient parental supervision.

Most of the private agencies have a school on their grounds, all of which are accredited, supervised by the State Education Department, and work with the youths' home schools to transfer credits and issue diplomas, based on State Education Department requirements. Some of the agencies provide very specialized treatment, such as residential treatment for youth who exhibit sexually harmful behaviors and services for dually diagnosed youth (i.e., youth with mental health needs who are also in need of substance abuse treatment).

The private agencies are not appropriate for all youth, including those who need to receive treatment in a locked, secure facility for their own protection and/or the protection of the community. We all have a vested interest in making sure that youth who are placed in secure settings receive the highest quality services possible, so when they return to their communities they can lead productive lives without victimizing others.

³ TFC Consultants, Inc. Implementation of Evidence Based Programs. www.mtfc.com/

⁴ *Selected Characteristics of Youth Entering and Leaving OCFS Custody Apr. 09 – Jun 09 or In Custody on June 30, 2009 and the Same Periods Last Year.* OCFS.

But for many youth, the private agencies are an appropriate and cost-effective option at about half the cost of placement in a state-operated facility. We do not need to look outside of New York to find high quality, cost-effective treatment options for our youth. We already have these services right here in New York and they're caring for hundreds of youth and their families, as you read this article.