

Reducing the Incarceration of Youth of Color in Berks County Through Structured Decision-making and Community-based Alternatives

Support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Models for Change Initiative has assisted Berks County juvenile justice stakeholders and community leaders in reducing the disproportionate detention and residential placement of African American and Latino youth.

Since late 2007, Berks County has reduced its annual detention population by 60% without compromising public safety. This translated to a reduction of 16 fewer Latino youth and five fewer African-American youth in detention on any given day in 2011 than in 2007. The County also dropped its use of out of home placement by 67% between fiscal year 2006/07 and fiscal year 2011/12, reducing its placements from 339 per year to 111 per year. In other words, the County found a way to serve 228 more youth in their homes rather than sending them to costly placement facilities far from their families and communities.

These reductions resulted from:

- **Data-Driven Analysis of Key Decision Points in Berks County**
- **Implementation of a Detention Assessment Instrument**
- **Creating an Evening Reporting Center**
- **Utilization of Alternatives to Out-of-Home Placement**

Before deciding on the most appropriate policy and program changes, the County engaged in data collection and analysis. Through interviews and focus groups with a wide range of stakeholders, review of existing data, and completion of a review of a representative file sample, the County gained insights about youth offending patterns, geographic concentrations of the youth served in the system, gaps in the continuum of available services, and lapses in access to accurate translation for court-involved families.

Berks County instituted the use of a Detention Assessment Instrument (DAI), a structured approach to detention decision making, the first of its kind in Pennsylvania. Structured decision making tools such as the DAI ensure that initial detention decisions are objective and based upon the same criteria and recorded in uniform ways. The

County fine-tuned its DAI and related policies to adjust provisions that were disproportionately impacting youth of color.

In addition, the county established a new Evening Reporting Center (ERC) in a neighborhood where many of the youth involved in the juvenile justice system live. The ERC provides an alternative to detention for those youth awaiting court hearings who need additional supervision, but do not pose a danger to public safety. It also serves youth who would otherwise have been detained for probation violations and similar infractions. Since the beginning of the program in December 2008, all youth in the program have attended every scheduled court appearance, and 96.4% have avoided committing a new offense while in the program. The County takes special care to ensure that the ERC employs staff who reflect the population of youth being served, who are almost entirely youth of color.

Important to the County's reduction of out of home placements is its change in philosophy, expanding its use of effective community-based alternatives, including evidence-based programs that are delivered in youths' homes. The County introduced Multisystemic Therapy (MST), a proven effective, home-based intensive intervention, in 2007 and also increased its scrutiny of probation officer requests for out of county placements. These two reforms have led to the county's substantial decreases in placements and have dramatically decreased costs to taxpayers. In 2011, 80.4% of the youth who exited the MST program have not reoffended, and 82% have avoided a juvenile justice placement. Use of a provider with a capacity for bilingual MST services helped ensure that the city's Latino families have fair access to this alternative to secure placement.

The County's successful drop in detention is stimulating further reforms. Due to the reduction in the detention population, the County permanently removed 24 beds from its secure detention program, altering the space to expand a non-secure treatment program that provides job readiness and other programming to youth and allows the youth to leave the facility for jobs and other activities. The County also created non-secure shelter beds for youth in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems who cannot return home for safety reasons. In 2012 the County Board of Commissioners decided to close the detention center and contract with a local provider for the limited number of beds the County now needs. The building is now being used as a community corrections center for reintegrating adult offenders.

These developments have translated into substantial savings for the County. The County reduced its out of home placement costs by \$2.4 million in 2009, with a further drop in 2010. In addition, efforts from this initiative have leveraged federal funding to support new programming. Stakeholders knew that youth needed more opportunities for job skill development in supportive settings. After two past failed attempts in Reading to garner a federal YouthBuild grant, a collaborative that grew out of the racial and ethnic disparities reduction project succeeded in winning a YouthBuild grant. Federal support totaled nearly \$1 million for the first three years of YouthBuild in the County. In addition, the steering committee was concerned about school

disengagement of youth of color, and the impacts of truancy among the juvenile justice-involved population. As a strategy for reducing school discipline problems and increasing school success, the committee began promoting the evidence-based practice of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Devereux Center for Effective Schools garnered \$100,000 in federal funding to help pilot PBIS in the Reading Public Schools.

Also important in Berks County's successes has been the involvement of a wide range of community members and system stakeholders. The project's steering committee involved clergy, school system personnel, community service providers, defense attorneys, prosecutors, community activists, youth, parents, judges, juvenile probation officers and police. The steering committee was critical in guiding the project, asking important questions and serving as a resource as new programs such as the ERC took shape. Steering committee members played key roles in improving the availability of court translators and translation of court-related juvenile justice documents, as well as helping project staff to collaborate with school systems and police.

Berks' successes have helped support dissemination of best practices elsewhere in Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency has funded implementation of detention assessment instruments and development of evening reporting centers in five other jurisdictions in Pennsylvania, as well as other innovations. The Juvenile Court Judges' Commission and the Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers are engaged in ongoing efforts to implement a statewide Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy that reflects many lessons learned from Models for Change projects, including those in Berks County.