

Protecting Public Safety Without Arrests in Montgomery County

Successful Program Prevents Delinquency and Saves Money

Executive Summary

Montgomery County, Maryland, successfully rehabilitates youth, without arrests, by providing an array of early interventions in the community.

Introduction

This brief examines Montgomery County's efforts to prevent juvenile delinquency by diverting youth away from formal intake and processing by the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services and instead providing local assessments and services.¹

Montgomery County's Model

In 1999, Montgomery County adopted a Comprehensive Strategy for Juvenile Justice in order to divert low-level young offenders from Maryland's juvenile justice system. The plan aimed to provide youth with prevention and early intervention services, i.e., treatment and therapy, in order to reduce delinquency. The strategy embodies and promotes the following principles:

- Strengthen the family;
- Support core social institutions;
- Promote delinquency prevention;
- Intervene immediately and effectively when delinquent behavior occurs; and
- Identify and control the small group of serious, violent and chronic juvenile offenders.

Eligibility

The strategy was developed to move eligible youth into diversion at the first point of contact with law enforcement--arrest. Once a youth is cited or given an arresting document, the youth's information is screened through the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) via the police department's Family Courts Division in order to determine if the youth is a first-time offender who is eligible for the program.

Eligibility is determined by considering the nature of the offense and whether the youth has a prior arrest, DJS referral, or previous participation in another jurisdiction's diversion program. Generally, first offenses and non-violent misdemeanor charges are

eligible for diversion. Incidents such as school-ground fights and simple assaults are handled on a case-by-case basis. Felonies and violent offenses are not eligible for diversion.

Once eligibility is determined, the youth and the parent or guardian receive a letter that invites the youth to participate in diversion opportunities. The youth and family have ten days to respond.

Intensive Case Management

Case managers play an integral role in the success of the diversion program. When eligible families do not respond to the initial inquiry, case managers make home visits to ensure that families understand the opportunity presented to them and the importance of utilizing the services offered when participating in the program. Also, case managers reengage youth and families who are falling into a pattern of non-compliance to help them identify the consequences of noncompliance and ensure that the youth are accessing the services to help them successfully complete the diversion program. This intensive case management prevents youth who initially struggle with the program from dropping out and continuing delinquent behavior.

Treatment and Services

Once a youth is admitted into the diversion program, he or she must complete the Screening and Assessment for Children and Adolescents, a behavioral health assessment tool. The results and recommendations of the assessment form the basis for the type and level of treatment the youth will receive.

Substance abuse and drug-related treatment is the most common service needed by youth admitted to the diversion program.² Depending on treatment needs, youth may receive a more intensive plan. Youth needing less intensive treatment are offered two levels of treatment. Level I consists of two therapy sessions: an individual session with the

² In 2009, 52 percent of referrals were for charges related to drugs or alcohol; 56 percent were in 2008. Charges categorized as "other" typically amount for 25 percent of referrals; however, these "other" charges are often related to alcohol and drug related incidents, e.g., summons for being at a party where underage drinking is involved.

¹ See also Advocates for Children and Youth, *Protecting Public Safety Without Juvenile Arrests* (July 2010).

youth and the counselor, and a second session with the youth, the family and the counselor. The two sessions total four hours of treatment. During these sessions, service coordinators provide youth with information on the dangers of drugs and alcohol, including the physical and mental harm they may cause, and other related drug and alcohol abuse educational materials.

Level II is a more comprehensive treatment approach. It consists of six sessions, totaling nine hours of treatment. The youth is also subject to urinalysis screenings.

Youth diagnosed with more serious substance abuse issues are offered more intensive services. Level I of the more intensive plan consists of up to six months of outpatient treatment. At minimum, the youth receives two sessions a week for the first six weeks. The focus is on measures to ensure successful rehabilitation such as drug and alcohol abuse education, group therapy sessions with peers, development of successful support systems and therapy to identify relapse triggers and prevention methods. After the initial six weeks, youth are required to attend a minimum of one session per week. They may attend more if they so desire.

Level II of the more intensive plan consists of more frequent therapy sessions. Participants require a minimum of nine hours per week for the first six weeks. After the initial six weeks, youth are required to attend a minimum of two sessions per week for up to nine months. In rare cases, youth may receive residential treatment services.

Montgomery County provides mental health treatment services that are not related to drug and alcohol abuse. These services are based on availability and resources from the county's Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Officials are currently working to increase services and participation for youth involved in non-drug or alcohol related charges.³

Interagency Collaboration

Montgomery County provides a strong emphasis on interagency collaboration within its diversion program. There is significant communication and collaboration between the State's Attorney's Office,

HHS, the local DJS office, the police and other public and private agencies that provide services to the youth and families.

Effectiveness

In Montgomery County, nearly 1 out of 2 youth are diverted away from the State's juvenile justice system.⁴ In addition, there is a high success rate among youth exiting the diversion program. In 2008, the county's Division of Juvenile Services reported a success rate of 84 percent. This means that only 16 percent of the youth were rearrested or received another citation.

Funding

The diversion program is funded solely by county appropriations. According to Montgomery County juvenile services staff, the annual costs savings to DJS is around \$100,000, the equivalent of salaries for two additional DJS caseworkers and other administrative costs.

Conclusion

The Montgomery County Comprehensive Strategy for Juvenile Justice has proven to be an effective model in the prevention of juvenile delinquency. With its intensive focus on treatment and therapy, the program addresses juvenile delinquency early on, finds ways to prevent future misconduct and saves the State money.

Local jurisdictions should assess their current practices and determine what is needed to adopt an effective arrest diversion alternative for first-time and low-risk juveniles. As evidenced by this program, a successful program requires collaboration among local stakeholders: local government, juvenile services, juvenile court, law enforcement, state's attorney, defense attorneys, social services, treatment providers, youth and families.

Early intervention and the reallocation of resources provide a long-term pay-off for all, and each Maryland jurisdiction—Baltimore City and the 23 counties—should have at least one effective diversion program for juveniles.

³ The treatment and therapy sessions, along with the behavioral assessment, are available to all youth in the juvenile system in Montgomery County, regardless of the level of offense and involvement of DJS.

⁴ In 2009, Montgomery County admitted 49 percent of all juveniles arrested into the diversion program; 53 percent were diverted in 2008.