



## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

A product of the Status Offense Reform Center (SORC), Notes from the Field is a series profiling jurisdictions that have undertaken status offense system change.

### *What is a status offense?*

Status offenses are behaviors that are prohibited under law only because of an individual's status as a minor, including running away from home, skipping school, violating a curfew, drinking under age, and acting "incorrigibly." They are problematic, but noncriminal in nature.

### *What is SORC?*

SORC provides policymakers and practitioners with tools and information to create effective, community-based responses for keeping young people who engage in noncriminal behavior out of the juvenile justice system. The Center is a project of the Vera Institute of Justice and is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's *Models for Change* Resource Center Partnership.

## Connecticut

POPULATION: 3,590,300

YOUTH POPULATION: 793,500

MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Urban/Suburban/Rural

### The Call to Action

Connecticut's traditional system for handling youth who commit status offenses and their families (also known as "Families with Service Needs," or FWSNs) relied heavily on juvenile courts. The state had no out-of-court mechanisms for providing FWSN youth with services, which resulted in low-risk youth facing the consequences associated with formal court processing. In 2002, 4,000 FWSN youth were referred to court—of these cases, more than 2,000 were formally processed, 1,000 were placed on probation, and several hundred were eventually subject to detention for violation of court orders associated with their FWSN case. Beyond being costly and overly punitive, court processing often failed to prevent future involvement in the juvenile justice system: of the youth detained for all offenses in 2005, more than half had had a prior FWSN case.

In response to increased lobbying from child advocacy organizations, including the Center for Children's Advocacy and the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, the Connecticut legislature passed a law in 2005 prohibiting detention of FWSN youth. In 2006, the legislature passed another law that mandated the creation of an advisory board charged with exploring out-of-court alternatives for status-offending youth and their families. The FWSN Advisory Board—which included educators, court officials, juvenile justice experts, and child advocates—was crucial in developing many comprehensive changes to Connecticut's status offense system in the years to come.

### The Change Process

After passing the law prohibiting detention of status offenders in 2005, the legislature agreed to delay implementation until 2007; that way, the FWSN Advisory Board would have time to develop thoughtful alternatives to the current system. The advisory board then assembled subcommittees to focus on four specific issues in the status offense system and reform process: truancy, high-need youth, evaluations/data, and legislative drafting/coordination. The advisory board also conducted a mapping exercise of its existing referral process for status offenses, and collected data from the Judicial Department on the number of status offense referrals and the demographics of youth receiving such referrals. Data on the source of referrals proved telling: while FWSN referrals can be made by a wide range of community members, including families, law enforcement officials, or child welfare workers, more than half of FWSN referrals came from schools.

In formulating changes to Connecticut's status offense system, the advisory board and its subcommittees drew on both local and national expertise. Members heard presentations from Connecticut's Department of Children & Families (DCF), the Court Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch (CSSD), and the state's Department of Education. The advisory board also learned about national status offense best practices by participating in a satellite presentation co-organized by the federal Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention and by bringing in representatives from Florida's reformed status offense system (see Florida's Notes from the Field). Finally, advisory board members conducted a site visit to Orange County, NY, to observe its Family Keys diversion model (see Orange County's Notes from the Field). This and the other systems the advisory board studied employ a triaged method of providing services to high-need youth, a feature Connecticut replicated in its new model.

### **The Model**

Connecticut's model exemplifies the tiered, community-based system of intervention that has proved effective in addressing status offenses in many other jurisdictions. First, the new system cuts down on the number of youth requiring formal system involvement. Connecticut law requires that schools take several in-house steps to address a child's truancy before referring him or her to court; changes to the court complaint form now make those steps clear to any school official wishing to make a referral. This change helped lead to a dramatic drop in the number of FWSN referrals (see "Outcomes" below).

Second, once a local court's Juvenile Probation department has determined that a child has been appropriately referred to FWSN, Connecticut's system is tailored to provide the least invasive level of intervention. After determining that other non-FWSN options have been exhausted, a Juvenile Probation officer conducts a risk and needs assessment of the child and family. Children and families deemed to be low-risk are referred to a FWSN liaison in each of the county's courts, who assists the child in finding community-based services and programs.

Third, the model offers intensive support for high-risk youth and families. If Juvenile Probation's assessment finds a child to be high risk and high need, the child is referred to a Family Support Center (FSC), a one-stop service center for youth and families requiring intensive services. The FSC will contact youth and families within three hours of receiving a referral and will conduct their own risk/needs assessment using screening tools such as the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument-2 (MAYSI-2) and the Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (SIQ). The FSC will then work collaboratively with the youth and family to develop a treatment plan, which may include family mediation, substance abuse treatment, or short-term respite care. Many FSCs are able to provide these services in-house; but if a child or family requires a program not provided by the FSC, it will provide a referral to a community-based service agency.

Initially piloted in four Connecticut communities, the FSC model received funding in 2010 to be replicated statewide.

### **Monitoring Progress and Ensuring Success**

A number of different mechanisms are now in place to ensure continued examination of Connecticut's status offense system. In its final report in 2010, the advisory board recommended that planning groups be implemented in order to facilitate continued collaboration among Connecticut's many juvenile justice stakeholders and study data related to Connecticut's new status offense model. Local Interagency Services Teams, or LISTs, now exist in every juvenile court district in the state. Through these groups, community juvenile justice stakeholders meet on a regular basis to discuss issues and service gaps in their jurisdiction's status offense system. In 2006, the state also drafted the Juvenile Justice Strategic Plan, a roadmap for juvenile justice reform that includes several goals for the treatment and court diversion of youth who commit status offenses. In order to ensure that practitioners are held accountable in achieving the plan's goals, the state created an Executive Implementation Team, comprised of representatives from state juvenile justice and youth/family organizations. The team, which meets quarterly, oversees implementation of the plan and ensures that its recommendations are put into practice.

### **Outcomes**

Connecticut's reform of its status offense system led to drastic changes in its FWSN court data and outcomes. Some notable results:

- From 2006 to 2008, the number of FWSN court referrals dropped by 41 percent, from 3,521 to 2,062.
- The percentage of those FWSN referrals receiving formal court processing dropped from 50 percent of referrals in 2006 to about 5 percent of referrals in 2010-2011.
- In 2006-07, 1,122 FWSN youth were arrested or otherwise referred to the juvenile justice system within six months of FWSN referral. By 2008-09, that number had dropped to 305.

### **Reflections**

*Hold schools to clear timelines:* In connecting truant youth with timely services through the changed FWSN program, Connecticut has encountered a major barrier: schools oftentimes wait until the end of the school year to file FWSN petitions, after many youth have accumulated far more absences than required to qualify as chronically truant under Connecticut's FWSN statute. In order to ensure that all youth receive swift and effective intervention, those in Connecticut's FWSN system recommend setting clear benchmarks for when schools should seek court assistance for truant youth.

*Find legislative champions:* In Connecticut, status offense reform began in Hartford, where advocates and juvenile justice experts worked tirelessly to drum up awareness among state legislators of both political parties. Their efforts not only provided funding and structures that would prove critical in transforming Connecticut's status offense system, they also created sustained interest in juvenile justice reform among those best positioned to make changes. Advocates and court officials in Connecticut recommended reaching out to legislators to help promote lasting status offense system reform, whether through traditional lobbying or by leveraging an existing connection to a local lawmaker.

*Pilot projects can lead to large-scale changes:* Connecticut's General Assembly initially only provided funding for four FSCs. While these four centers could only serve a subset of the state's status offender population, rolling out the model in a limited number of jurisdictions allowed for a more thoughtful and effective expansion when the state legislature granted funding for centers statewide in 2010. Practitioners were able to collect and analyze data on the initial sites and fine-tune service provision accordingly.

### Related Resources

Check out the following resources related to Connecticut's status offense system reform effort at <http://www.statusoffensereform.org/library>:

- Connecticut Family Support Centers PowerPoint Presentation
- Family Support Centers: Serving Families with Service Needs in Connecticut
- Families with Service Needs Advisory Board Report to the Connecticut General Assembly
- Families with Service Needs Advisory Board Report to the Connecticut General Assembly Final Progress Update
- Making Court the Last Resort: A New Focus for Supporting Families in Crisis
- The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Strategic Plan: Building Toward a Better Future