



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.

Orange County, New York

POPULATION: 374,500
YOUTH POPULATION: 98,500
MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Suburban

The Call to Action

In 2001, New York State enacted a major change to its status offender laws. Traditionally, only youth under the age of 16 could be petitioned as Persons in Need of Services (PINS). In order to enable families to obtain court assistance for their older teenagers, Governor George Pataki signed legislation that raised the PINS cutoff age to 18. Faced with an influx of new youth into the system, several New York counties began to re-evaluate their PINS systems and consider whether court intervention was truly the most efficient—or effective—way of handling youth in distress.

Orange County was one of the jurisdictions to engage in such a process. Under the county's then-current system, PINS youth would be referred to the probation department, which would then bring together Department of Social Services (DSS) representatives, mental health professionals, and social service providers to develop an action plan for the child and family. This system had many weaknesses: families in crisis would often wait up to three months for needed services, and youth were frequently referred to court—and thus could face out-of-home placement—when diversion efforts failed.¹ Wishing to make their system more effective and less adversarial for youth and families, probation officials collaborated with other county stakeholders to implement needed reforms.

The Change Process

The county first organized a PINS Steering Committee, comprised of representatives from a number of different youth organizations and government bureaus. The county also designated the DSS as the local agency responsible for taking the lead in implementing any planned changes to the county's system. Thanks to the county's early work in planning for the legislative changes, Orange was one of six counties selected by New York State's Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to receive peer-to-peer technical assistance from the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) in reforming their PINS system. After a presentation by Vera on the predicted increase in intakes and associated costs as a result of the raised PINS age limit, county stakeholders were eager to change current practice. Stakeholders also heard presentations from other jurisdictions that had successfully changed their approaches to status offenses, including Cook County, Illinois, where community

¹ New York does not allow for PINS youth to be placed in secure detention pending a court date or for violating a court order, but the state does allow for youth to be placed in out-of-home facilities upon disposition of their PINS cases.

agencies provide crisis intervention services to youth and families before any court involvement. These promising practices convinced county officials that change was not only necessary, but also achievable.

As part of its planning process, the county conducted an evaluation of its existing system. From surveys of local officials and evaluations of court data, the county was able to identify the primary behaviors leading to PINS referrals. The surveys indicated that family crises were driving many of the PINS referrals coming from parents. In addition, local leaders sought to involve youth and families affected by the PINS system, including them in many planning discussions and stakeholder meetings. By welcoming feedback from those who would be most affected by PINS changes, officials were able to tailor services to meet family needs. For example, as a result of family feedback, the county focused on creating extended hours of operation for PINS-related services and eventually implemented 24/7 crisis intervention services.

The Model

When a family member, school official, or law enforcement officer wishes to make a PINS referral, he or she contacts the county probation department, which conducts an initial intake assessment. After intake, however, eligible youth and families are now immediately referred to the Family Keys Program, a non-profit entity that was contracted by the county and opened in 2003. Family Keys sends a caseworker to conduct an interview with the family within 48 hours—and sometimes within 2 hours if a family requires urgent intervention. More than 75 percent of PINS referrals are sent from the probation department to Family Keys.

After the initial visit, the caseworker helps develop a Family Diversion Plan, which includes referrals to community-based services and supports (usually provided within two weeks of contact, as compared with the 60-to-90-day wait that was typical under the old system) and strategies for accessing family support and assistance. Family Keys often assists the family in drafting a contract between all members of the household, which includes desired changes in behavior and expectations for future conduct. Family Keys continues to work with the family as they implement this plan, and only refers a youth back to court if all available interventions fail.

Monitoring Progress and Ensuring Success

Orange County's DSS uses performance-based contracting for the programs and services to which the probation department and Family Keys refer youth and families, which enables it to hold providers accountable in meeting its PINS reform goals. For example, the county mandates that contracted services prevent out-of-home placement for 90 percent of the youth they serve, and providers' performance is taken into account when DSS makes any future funding decisions.

The program has evolved to meet the changing needs of the community. After the county realized that many runaways were still facing court-ordered placement in outside facilities because they weren't benefitting

from Family Keys services that would allow them to remain safely at home, the organization began to send caseworkers to meet runaways and their families at the probation department as soon as they were brought in by the sheriff's department. Caseworkers now work intensively with them to develop a service plan to address existing needs that is presented to the judge at the initial PINS hearing. This model has drastically reduced the number of runaway youth subject to out-of-home placement.

Outcomes

Within only a few years of implementing PINS reforms, the county began to see dramatic results:

- In its first full year of operation, Family Keys served 467 youth. Of those, only 6 percent were referred back to the probation department for court involvement.
- In its first five years of operation, between March 2003 and March 2008, Family Keys received 2,375 referrals. Of the 2,180 families who accepted Family Keys' services, 98 percent, or 2,136 children, avoided out-of-home placement.

Reflections

Continue services when applicable: One struggle Orange County encountered after it initiated its reforms was how to ensure that PINS youth with high needs continue to receive assistance after their cases had been formally closed. To overcome this challenge, the county developed a robust network of nonprofit service providers and employs standardized risk/needs assessments that have proven essential in identifying which PINS youth most need additional services.

Get judges on board: Orange County has worked hard to obtain approval for its PINS diversion efforts from local family court judges, and their support has proven instrumental in encouraging not just PINS diversion but PINS prevention. Officials report that many local judges now push back on parents who file PINS petitions in court, encouraging them to seek out all available social services before resorting to court intervention.

Track outcomes, not just outputs: Now that Orange County has developed an effective way of reducing formal PINS referrals, officials now focus less on numbers of youth receiving services and more on the results achieved by those services. By focusing on outcomes instead of outputs—and by holding service providers accountable in achieving those outcomes, particularly in providing quick services to families in crisis—the county hopes to further refine their model for serving youth who commit status offenses.

Related Resource

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

- What Do I Do Now? A Resource Guide For Parents Experiencing Problems With Their Children