



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.

Rapides Parish, Louisiana

POPULATION: 132,400
YOUTH POPULATION: 33,900
MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Rural

The Call to Action

In Louisiana, youth who commit status offenses follow two pathways: informal FINS ("Families in Need of Services") outside the court and formal FINS inside the court. In Rapides Parish, a mostly rural area of central Louisiana, formal FINS cases are handled by the local district attorney, whereas informal FINS cases are handled by a separate department within the juvenile division of the local district court. Children referred to both systems are evaluated and matched with services. Service plans issued through formal FINS are binding, whereas any services issued through informal FINS are strictly voluntary.

In keeping with the intention of the Louisiana Children's Code, state legislation that created the FINS structure, the informal FINS system in Rapides was seen as a way of diverting young people from court involvement and treating rather than punishing them. Over the years, informal FINS officials welcomed and even encouraged referrals to their office from schools, parents, or other community members. However, the informal FINS system still used court resources and sometimes involved more formal procedures (such as Family Team Conferences with a panel of community leaders). Furthermore, informal referrals could eventually lead to formal FINS petitions if the court-diversion interventions did not succeed. Concerned by the influx of low-risk youth being inappropriately referred to informal FINS, and the associated court referrals that followed, Judge Patricia Koch, then-presiding judge of the 9th Judicial District Court's juvenile division, realized that she and others had inadvertently "opened the floodgates to the system." With support from the MacArthur Foundation's Models for Change Initiative, Judge Koch worked together with other system stakeholders to reduce informal FINS referrals, with the hope of stemming the tide of later court involvement.

The Change Process

With help from member organizations of the Models for Change National Resource Bank and researchers from the University of New Orleans, Rapides began its reform planning by conducting a thorough analysis of its system, including a detailed mapping exercise to track various entry points and collect key data. This analysis led to two key findings. First, between 2006 and 2008, a large proportion (58 percent) of informal FINS

referrals came from schools, compared to 24 percent from families and 8 percent from law enforcement officials. Second, given the high number of referrals, the informal FINS system often was delayed: the average time from referral to contact with a child's family was approximately two weeks. Based on these findings, officials decided to limit school referrals to the informal FINS office and implement a triage process that would enable the office to identify and handle higher need cases in a more expedited fashion.

In planning its reforms, the parish drew inspiration from other jurisdictions. Through Models for Change, officials were able to learn more about national best practices, including Florida's acclaimed model for addressing status offenses (see Florida's Notes from the Field). In that state, status offenders and their families, known as FINS/CINS (Children in Need of Services), are first referred to service providers within the statewide nonprofit Florida Network. Youth only receive formal court petitions if the interventions and services provided by these agencies fail. Florida's more efficient, less court-centered approach—and the real-world struggles and successes the state went through in implementing it—provided encouragement to Rapides officials as they planned their own system changes.

The Model

The reform model pursued by Rapides had two main goals: to limit informal and formal FINS referrals when not truly necessary, and to make service delivery to FINS-involved youth more efficient and targeted when services *are* needed. To accomplish the first goal, Rapides implemented a school exhaustion form: before making an informal FINS referral, school officials are now required to carry out and document a series of in-school interventions intended to address the underlying behavior before resorting to the FINS system.

As for the second goal, Rapides' informal FINS office now uses a combination of data and evidence-based practices to identify and provide services to its most high-need youth. When the office receives an informal FINS referral now, staff members use the MAYSI-2, a screening instrument used to identify self-destructive behaviors and mental health issues, to assess youth referred to its office. Based on the MAYSI-2 results, along with interviews with family members, the informal FINS office is now able to identify the children most in need of immediate care and provide services targeted to the youth's particular needs. Finally, the parish prepared a FINS manual to disseminate to all system stakeholders, which laid out the proper formal and informal FINS procedures to ensure uniformity among referrals and treatment plans.

Monitoring Progress and Ensuring Success

The success of Rapides' FINS system is largely due to the communication and mutual accountability among parish stakeholders. Because Louisiana's Act 555 mandated that parishes set up Children, Youth, & Planning Boards (CYPBs) to coordinate the provision of local youth services, Rapides had built-in collaboration among different child experts. Its CYPB members continue to discuss and monitor the system's operations during their regular meetings long after system improvements have been implemented, and stakeholders such as school officials and mental health professionals regularly meet on a formal and informal basis. Because of this frequent communication, every official is responsible for ensuring that FINS system involvement is limited and efficient.

Outcomes

Data collected before and after Rapides reformed its status offense system indicate that many of the changes had their desired effects. Some noteworthy findings:

- The parish saw a remarkable decrease in informal FINS referrals. In 2006, a total of 367 youths were referred to the informal FINS system, whereas in 2010 a total of 222 youths were referred (a decrease of 40 percent). This reduction was largely due to a decrease in referrals from schools.
- The number of informal FINS referrals resulting in formal FINS petitions also dropped dramatically, decreasing by approximately 50 percent from 2006 to 2010, from 129 to 65 youth.

Reflections

Work together and communicate often. In making changes to their system, juvenile court officials had the benefit of existing close-knit relationships with other stakeholders in their parish, such as school officials and mental health professionals. Some of these relationships, due to Rapides' rural, community-oriented character, came about organically. Others, however, were the product of deliberate structural or programmatic decisions. Thanks to an interagency agreement drafted by the attorney for the local school board, court and school officials were able to share information and data on individual students. Rapides' CYPB also provided local juvenile justice stakeholders with more formal opportunities to share ideas and suggestions for improvement. The communication fostered by these relationships—whether natural or planned—was critical to carrying out changes to Rapides' system.

Celebrate the little victories. In leading Rapides' status offense reform effort and in studying similar efforts in other jurisdictions, Judge Koch came to an important realization: no system is going to be perfect. Despite any jurisdiction's best efforts, there would still be cases where high-need youth don't get the services they require or where low-risk youth receive far too much system intervention. In order to remain positive and motivated to enact further change, she realized that each system reformer must learn to appreciate "baby steps": the little successes that one day may add up to a system's total transformation.

Related Resources

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

- Juvenile Justice Mapping Process Rapides Final Report
- Rapides Parish 2009 Ungovernable Referrals to Informal FINS
- Rapides Parish FINS Cases Data Analysis for the Rapides Parish Court and FINS Program
- Rapides Parish Policy and Procedure Manual: Family in Need of Services (FINS) Program
- Sustaining Juvenile Justice System Reform A Report to the Louisiana Juvenile Justice Implementation Commission