



## 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.

## Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana

POPULATION: 192,768

YOUTH POPULATION: 52,818

MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Urban/Rural

### The Call to Action

Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana had a strong track record of juvenile justice system reform when it was selected in 2007 as a site for the MacArthur Foundation's Models for Change (MfC) initiative. In particular, Calcasieu had shown so much success responding to status offense cases—known in Louisiana as Families in Need of Services (FINS)—without court involvement, that in 2008 only seven percent of the parish's FINS cases resulted in a court petition. Youth alleged of a status offense were referred for intake to the Office of Juvenile Justice Services (OJJS), which determined what services the youth and family needed. The intake resulted in an informal service plan. Only when all community-based service options were exhausted would a formal FINS court petition be considered.

Although considered a model jurisdiction both within and outside of Louisiana, parish officials were committed to further improving their FINS system. Inspired by the MfC initiative's goal to enhance and expand alternatives to court and formal processing for youth in, or at risk of entering, the juvenile justice system, parish officials decided to look closely at their FINS system to identify any weaknesses. Through this process, they found that the average length of time between referral and the development of a service plan following intake was often 50 days or more, in part because youth typically "bounced" from one agency to another. Armed with this information, officials decided to improve their FINS case processing.

### The Change Process

Calcasieu's Children and Youth Planning Board (CYPB)—established in 2005 to assess and address the needs of children in the parish—took the lead in planning FINS system improvements. Chaired by Dane Bolin, Director of OJJS, the board had broad stakeholder representation from education, law enforcement, prosecution, public defense, mental health, and parenting and youth organizations. Its charge, according to Bolin, was to work as a team to "address how our system could respond to families in crisis in a timely manner while also getting them what they need." To this end, the board undertook a comprehensive planning process, analyzing local data and reviewing promising practices from jurisdictions across the nation.

With technical assistance and research support from the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), the board conducted a descriptive analysis of OJJS demographic data to better understand the young people served by the FINS system and the time it took for them to be served. They also conducted a provider survey to identify what services were being offered through OJJS contracts and which providers were operating evidence-based programs. Survey results helped the board identify gaps in services. For example, members learned that OJJS did not have a contract to provide mentoring services, despite the fact that strong mentoring programs were available in the community. Finally, the youth survey helped the board learn about youths' interests and identify the key challenges in efficiently linking young people to services.

With the support of an MfC planning grant, board members visited jurisdictions in other states to learn about different assessment and service delivery models. Guided by an initial interest in “one-stop shop” assessment centers, Bolin and one of his colleagues visited three assessment centers in Florida. According to Bolin, “they were all very different and none were an exact fit for what we were looking to implement, but we took bits and pieces from each.” He then took 15 of his fellow board members to Jefferson County, Colorado to visit their Juvenile Assessment Center. They were inspired by everything they saw—from the process to the furniture and colors on the wall—and returned to Calcasieu committed to developing an assessment center of their own that would provide youth and families immediate access to needed supports and services in the community.

### **The Model**

In 2011, the Calcasieu Parish Police Jury (the local governing body), in partnership with the CYPB, launched the Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC)—a centralized point of intake for both FINS and delinquent youth, housed under OJJS, with the goal of diverting youth and families in need to services as quickly as possible. Funded through a 10-year, parish wide property tax, the MARC is open from 8am to 11pm Monday through Saturday.

Youth alleged of status offenses may be referred to the MARC by law enforcement, family members, school officials, or other concerned adults. When a referral is made, a MARC officer contacts the family and explains the MARC process, emphasizing that participation is completely voluntary. If the family refuses to participate in the process, the case is referred to a senior MARC officer who may initiate the filing of a formal FINS petition. If the youth or family is in crisis at the time of referral then the family is diverted to a member of the crisis team, who works with the family to address the crisis before returning them to the MARC to continue with the intake process.

The officer begins by gathering basic demographic and family history information, and then separates the guardian and youth to conduct assessments. Youth are administered the Juvenile Inventory for

Functioning (JIFF), which assesses how a youth functions in everyday life across ten areas. If the youth is assessed as high-risk in any area, a follow-up screening may be conducted using the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument, Version 2 (MAYSI-2) or Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory (SASSI) tool. While the youth is completing the JIFF, the MARC officer conducts a semi-structured interview with the youth's guardian.

Based on the results of the assessments and interviews, the MARC officer develops a service plan which may recommend counseling, functional family therapy, after-school or other programs offered by the MARC's network of providers. If the youth and family find the service plan agreeable then the MARC officer schedules initial appointments with the service providers identified in the plan. The case is then transferred to OJJS' FINS department for monitoring. The case may remain open for as few as 30 days but no more than six months. The level of supervision depends on the needs of the family. For non-compliant families, additional staffing may be required.

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

OJJS officials conducted extensive trainings with MARC staff for six months in advance of its launch. Regardless of role, all staff received training in every aspect of the MARC process, from administering assessments to data management. And, staff spent nearly a month inside the building getting a feel for the physical space and managing "mock" cases before the MARC opened its doors to the public.

OJJS holds "Tuesdays with Data" meetings to review information on referrals, intakes, and outcomes and identify and respond to any worrisome trends in a timely manner. For example, officials are trained to look for signs of "net-widening" (that is, when youth who would otherwise not be brought into the juvenile justice system end up there as a result of contact with the MARC); they do this by examining court appearance trends pre- and post-MARC implementation to look for any changes that may be associated with the MARC. OJJS is also working to track case processing times by developing a time stamp process that will record case flow through the MARC. Specifically, OJJS officials will soon be able to identify how long it takes for a family to receive an intake after walking through the door.

As the MARC was being implemented, the parish contracted with Vera to conduct a process assessment. The assessment, which was qualitative in nature, explored how well the MARC's practices aligned with the program model and identified factors that affected implementation, both positively and negatively. The findings of this assessment helped OJJS improve and expand on the MARC's policies and practices.

### **Outcomes**

The MARC is an extension of Calcasieu's practice of responding to FINS cases in the community. From 2007 to 2011, Calcasieu sent, on average,

less than four percent of informal FINS referrals to court. In 2011 (MARC's first year of operation), less than one percent of referrals resulted in a court petition. Furthermore, no youth has been placed in a residential facility on FINS charges since 2005. Lastly, as a direct result of the MARC the time between seeking help and receiving help has dropped dramatically, from 50 days or more to roughly two hours.

### Reflections

*Thoughtful planning takes time:* The development of the MARC was an iterative process that took approximately 18 months of planning. The lengthy planning period allowed CYPB members to assess their current system, think through all of the nuts and bolts of the MARC model and most important, establish trust and buy-in across agencies. It also allowed OJJS to adequately train staff prior to the launch of the center and involve staff in the development of the MARC process and program manual—something that gave them a greater stake in the success of the MARC. Reflecting on their planning process, Bolin advises, “if you open up too quickly you could do more harm than good; reform is not an easy process.”

*Engaging law enforcement is critical:* After the MARC opened, staff found that law enforcement officers were not consistently utilizing the MARC. Initially this caused frustration among administrators, but OJJS quickly addressed the problem through a series of trainings for law enforcement officers and enhanced communication with law enforcement leadership. OJJS officials emphasized how the new model could help officers reduce their workload. Previously, officers spent hours trying to link a family in crisis to needed services; now they can simply refer that family to the MARC in less than 12 minutes.

*A timely crisis response system is necessary:* The MARC is intended to provide immediate access to services for all youth and families who come through its door, including those in crisis. Despite the fact that the MARC operates under extended hours (it is open until 11pm and on Saturdays), most crisis situations unfortunately occur late at night. Initially, the MARC relied upon a crisis hotline to respond to families during off-hours, but staff soon found that the hotline, which was operated from outside the parish, could take up to two hours to respond to a family. OJJS is now working with a local non-profit organization to implement a more responsive hotline and is considering extending its hours of operation to Sunday.

### Related Resources

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

- MARC Policy and Procedure Manual

- MARC Process Diagram
- Sustaining Juvenile Justice System Reform: A Report to the Louisiana Juvenile Justice Implementation Commission