



## 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.

## Florida

POPULATION: 19,320,000

YOUTH POPULATION: 4,006,544

MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Urban/Suburban/Rural

### The Call to Action

Florida's efforts to reform its status offense system began in the early 1980s. Concerned about the decline in federal funding for runaway shelters and the negative impact that this loss in funding would have on young people throughout the state, a group of legislators launched a rigorous public awareness campaign to support the passage of the Runaway Youth and Family Act (RYFA). This act passed in 1983 and established a statewide task force charged with developing a plan to design and implement a new service continuum for runaway youth and their families.

### The Change Process

The Statewide Runaway Youth Task Force consisted of a number of stakeholders, including school officials, judges, mental health professionals, law enforcement officers, and a young person and parent who had been impacted by the system. This group started by collectively defining "troubled youth" to understand the scope of their work. It developed a set of recommendations based on the reports of 11 district-level task forces that had been charged with researching the specific needs of youth in their areas. The Statewide Task Force's final report led to a 1984 legislative mandate for Florida to have 23 full-service centers to provide a wide range of services, from prevention to aftercare, to youth and families. The Legislature appropriated \$15 million to fund the phase-in of the new service continuum, which covered the cost of the first few shelters.

At the same time, the Florida Network for Youth and Family Services (the Network)—an organization founded in the 1970s to represent providers that worked with homeless, runaway, and troubled youth—was expanded to collect data on runaways for the state, provide quality assurance controls, train agency staff members, and assist with communications and fundraising. By the end of the 1980s, the state had a network of 20 shelters and programs that provided a range of services for runaways and youth engaged in other non-delinquent behavior. Today there is a full continuum of services, including 28 shelters (that also provide non-residential services) and 12 stand-alone non-residential service agencies.

In 1992, after the initial service continuum was established, the Florida legislature moved to privatize services for the status offender population, meaning that families and children were no longer required to "pass through" a government agency to get services. This population is defined

in Florida as Children In Need of Services (CINS) (court-ordered) and Families In Need of Services (FINS) (voluntary), and neither category is available to children in the juvenile justice or foster care systems. Through the privatization effort, responsibilities for intake and assessment were removed from the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (DHRS) and were contracted out to the community-based agencies represented by the Network. A few years later, oversight and funding of CINS/FINS services moved from DHRS to the newly-created Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ).

### The Model

The Network represents 31 community agencies that serve troubled teens (ages 10-17) and their families through a continuum of residential and non-residential services. Youth and families can go to any of the Network shelters 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They may also be referred to a Network provider by law enforcement officials, school officials, or other concerned adults. Following referral, the process usually follows these steps:

- *Screening:* Staff at Network-affiliated shelters complete a standard screening form for each case to determine eligibility and to identify immediate service needs.
- *Intake Meeting:* After the youth is deemed eligible for services, the family and young person meet with an intake counselor at their local service center. The counselor gathers detailed information about the family and the youth, including medical history and living arrangements, and also conducts a suicide screening to determine whether the young person needs an immediate intervention.
- *In-Depth Assessment:* A psychosocial assessment is completed using a customized assessment tool. Staff often supplement this tool with other standardized tools as needed, such as the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument (MAYSI). This process helps develop a comprehensive picture of the problems faced by the youth and/or family, prioritize intervention steps, and gather pre-service data to evaluate the effectiveness of services provided.
- *Referral to Provider:* Following the assessment, a referral is made to an appropriate service within the Network and a case plan is developed. Young people and their families play an important role in the development of this plan and their needs are prioritized. Specific goals and timelines are decided and responsibilities are designated to all involved. The case plan is developed within seven working days after the completion of the assessment and is signed by the youth, parent/legal guardian, local provider staff, and local provider supervisor.

- *Ongoing Review of Case Plan:* The case plan is reviewed by the counselor and family regularly to ensure that the stated goals are being completed in a timely manner. On rare occasions, cases can be referred to court and be designated a CINS if the family repeatedly refuses to cooperate or more intensive services are needed.
- *Case Closure and Follow-up:* A case is terminated when the provision of CINS/FINS services has been completed. A mandatory follow-up is conducted 180 days after the end of services.

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

In addition to advocating for and supporting providers, the Network is also responsible for contract management. DJJ contracts directly with the Network, which then subcontracts with local providers and ensures that appropriate data is collected and quality services are provided. There is also an annual report card for each provider on key process and outcome measures to determine the following year's level of funding and terms of the contract, if continued. These measures were determined through consensus building among the DJJ, the Network, and the local providers.

The Network holds its service providers to very high standards in their performance-based contracts: 85 percent of youth served by a program must complete the program, 90 percent must remain crime-free while receiving services, and 87 percent must have no court adjudications (findings of guilt) six months after discharge from services. The Network tracks these outcomes through a centralized database. Providers enter case-level information into the database and the collected information is shared at statewide meetings that occur three to four times a year, allowing for continual learning and reassessment by providers. The Network also publishes outcome data in an annual report that is available to the public via their website.

On-site annual Quality Assurance (QA) reviews are also conducted. These reviews are based on QA standards that are developed and distributed by DJJ with input from the Network. They are conducted at random by review teams comprised of DJJ staff, Network staff, and one or more "peer reviewers" from other CINS/FINS local providers. This process ensures that providers are committed to, and held responsible for, providing the best services possible. It also provides an opportunity for service providers to learn from each other and bring back new ideas to their own agencies.

### **Outcomes**

The Network's 2012 annual report demonstrates how effective this model is in serving troubled youth and families. It states that 66 percent of youth served and 68 percent of youth admitted were from high-crime zip codes and were greatly at risk of entering the delinquency system. Intervention, however, produced striking results: 92 percent of youth in residential

programs, and 93 percent in non-residential programs, completed their service plans. Moreover, 91 percent of the 14,847 youth served from 2011-2012 were crime-free six months after completing services. It is also important to note that of the 11,111 status offense referrals in fiscal year 2013, only 4 percent (or 476) were sent to court.

Besides supporting youth, families, and communities, these programs are also cost-effective. A Florida Tax Watch Study in 2001 demonstrated that the Network was saving the state millions of dollars in delinquency-related costs by supporting troubled youth and families. A recent evaluation by the Justice Research Center suggests that more than \$160 million dollars in subsequent DJJ juvenile justice placement expenses were avoided as a result of the Network's services.

### Reflections

*A balance of autonomy and accountability is important when managing a network of providers:* Within a standard framework, the Network grants providers a good deal of autonomy in designing program models that are responsive to local needs. All providers, however, are held accountable to high standards that are defined in their contracts, and the Network's thorough Quality Assurance process described above ensures that programming is robust and effective.

*Ongoing and targeted public education helps sustain stakeholder buy-in:* The Network has always been proactive in spreading awareness about the work of its providers. One of their early and ongoing goals was to ensure that providers educate their communities through local newspaper articles each year to tell the stories of youth who are served, while protecting their identities. In recent years, this strategy has included television and radio campaigns that reach broader audiences. The Network, since its creation, has also educated legislators on a regular basis to maintain continued statewide support for young people committing status offenses and their families. Outreach to communities and families was also identified as an important goal. DJJ's contract with the Network, and the law, require providers to publish informational materials for distribution to parents, schools, churches, doctor's offices, etc. Service providers also hold public events with local leaders to educate the community and raise private funds.

*Defining a clear vision and mission can be critical to long term success:* Reform in Florida was not always orderly and is still ongoing. Services have come and gone based upon data regarding effectiveness and cost efficiency, and new applications of the model have arisen in recent years. There is now a statewide Citizen's Board that advises and reviews the Network as a whole. Patience, persistence, and public engagement and input have preserved a focus on this often-ignored or over-treated population of youth and families. But all this emanated from a clearly written vision and a specific implementation plan that has provided the road map for progress since 1984.

## Related Resources

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

- 2011 Florida Network Evaluation
- Assessment of Prevention Services of Florida Network
- Florida Network Annual Report 2012
- Florida Network Policy and Procedure Manual
- Florida Network Quality Improvement Standards
- Making Court the Last Resort: A New Focus for Supporting Families in Crisis