

Office of the Child Advocate
Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board
Community Based Interventions Subcommittee
Monday, April 28, 2025
11:00 AM – 12:30 PM
Meeting held virtually

Subcommittee Members or Designees Present:

Kimberly Lawrence (Probation)
Leon Smith (CfJJ)
Amy Ponte (CAFL)
Dawn Christie (Parent)
Thula Sibanda (DYS)
Alton Jones (CLM)
Laura Miller (MDAA)
Susan Gill-Hickey (DMH)
Latoya Nicholas (Parent)
Stacey Lynch (DPH)
Rebecca Brink (DCF)
Juin Liu (DESE)

OCA Staff:

Melissa Threadgill
Kristi Polizzano
Arianna Turner
Kerin Miller
Alix Riviere
Morgan Byrnes

Other Attendees:

Lydia Todd (CLM)
Cindy Powers (NFI)
Becki Moore (DYS)
Kathleen Bitetti (OSA)
Josh Quirk (NAMI)
Katherine Perry-Lorentz (DYS)
Jennifer Hallisey (MassHealth)
Omar Irizarry (DMH)
Matt Cooney
Erin Stewart
Darcie Edwards

Meeting Commenced: 11:03 AM

Welcome and Introductions:

Ms. Polizzano welcomed the attendees to the Community Based Interventions (CBI) Subcommittee virtual meeting. She welcomed members to introduce themselves.

Review and Approval of Minutes from the February Meeting:

Ms. Polizzano held a formal vote on the approval of the previous Community Based Interventions meeting minutes. Kimberly Lawrence, Stacey Lynch, Thula Sibanda, Alton Jones, and Susan Gill-Hickey all voted to approve the minutes. Laura Miller abstained. No one opposed.

The meeting minutes for February 25, 2025 were approved.

Ms. Polizzano then provided an update on the status of the dually-involved youth (DIY) project as it relates to the work of the subcommittee and presented the meeting agenda, which features DIY guest presentations.

DIY Project: Guest Presentations

Crossover Youth A Provider Perspective NFI Massachusetts

Ms. Polizzano introduced Ms. Todd, the Executive Director of NFI Massachusetts, and Ms. Powers, the Director of Adolescent Residential Services at NFI, and welcomed them to begin presenting.

Ms. Todd first presented the definition of crossover youth as it relates to this project. Ms. Powers added that in their experience, youth do not cross over from congregate care to Department of Youth Services (DYS) detention or commitment very often; the main concern is youth crossing over from Department of Children and Families (DCF) to DHS.

Ms. Todd then provided background information on NFI Massachusetts, and Ms. Powers reviewed the DCF residences that are currently operated by NFI. She highlighted that NFI has a continuum of care for Transition Aged Youth (TAY).

Ms. Powers then reviewed the referrals and admissions process at NFI, explaining the ways in which youth can enter their care. She explained that youth with juvenile justice system involvement receive the same types of treatment as those without involvement, but adjustments may need to be made to their schedules and activities in order to accommodate any justice-related restrictions (e.g., GPS restrictions, attending court dates).

Ms. Todd then shared some of the concerns related to youth crossing over from the emergency and treatment programs, noting that NFI tries diligently to avoid arrest at this point in the process. She noted that there has been a noticeable shift from a tough and punitive intervention system to one that is more humane and trauma informed. Ms. Todd shared that NFI reviews any incidents that happen during which staff could have done a better job in managing behavior.

One member asked what “screeners” are. Ms. Powers explained that screeners are part of the crisis team evaluation of a youth and that NFI also does their own internal screening. She added that crisis teams are contracted with providers and available 24 hours a day. Ms. Powers also shared that NFI programs have liaisons at local police department with whom they communicate about any youth that are particularly struggling as a pre-emptive measure prior to an escalation or incident.

Ms. Powers then provided several examples of youth engaging in potential delinquent behavior and reviewed when programs will call law enforcement for help. She shared that NFI has tried to build strong relationships with local police departments to achieve more positive and less disruptive responses when they need to call the police for help. Ms. Powers emphasized that NFI is trying to keep kids out of DYS when possible.

Ms. Todd reviewed the trainings NFI requires for adolescent group care workers and their policies/practices for working with this population. She added that the trainings she discussed are the ones relevant to this project, and there are many more that are not listed. Ms. Todd also shared that in conducting program reviews, they look for program specific trends and work on improving responses to specific types of events.

Ms. Powers then shared more information about missing in care/AWOL, drug screening, and medical clearance protocols, many of which exceed the minimum requirements set by DCF and DYS. She also shared information about a commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) tool that NFI developed.

Ms. Todd transitioned into discussing detention facilities, beginning with the definition of detention. She then shared information on the NFI Lakeside Detention Center, emphasizing that youth can sometimes stay in detention for extended periods of time.

Ms. Powers then shared more details about the facilities and the limitations of serving kids in the detention phase. She shared that NFI uses the Attachment, Regulation, Competency (ARC) model to help kids while detained.

Ms. Powers then shared bright spots and challenges, and Ms. Todd welcomed questions and comments on the presentation.

One member asked what communication exists between providers and defense counsel. Ms. Powers shared that NFI does not communicate with defense counsel and that communication is just between the youth and defense counsel. She added that any serious incidents go through DYS for communication.

One member noted how impressive NFI’s training investments are highlighting their importance in ensuring responses to kids are appropriate and that staff are kept safe. They then asked if there is ongoing training for staff, and how NFI manages acute incidents. Ms. Powers shared that NFI

has both agency and programmatic trainings and that all weekly staff meetings have an hour dedicated to clinical training to review youth behaviors so that staff can intervene in the most appropriate way. She also shared that programs can bring in a 1:1 staff/youth relationship for kids when needed. One member asked how NFI is able to secure the 1:1 relationships. Ms. Powers responded that it can be difficult to staff the 1:1s, but programs get creative around the interventions used.

Ms. Todd shared that the current staff vacancy rate is down from 38% to around 10%, with the goal of getting to the single digit vacancy rate. She added that they have worked with the Center on Child Wellbeing and Trauma (CCWT) to complete the Trauma Informed and Responsive (TIR) assessment and have implemented a protocol for handling incidents.

One member asked about variance in police responses to program incidents and asked if the Municipal Police Training Commission (MPTC) has ever reached out about doing a training for law enforcement officers on responding to incidents with youth. Ms. Todd shared that the police ride alongs conducted by the Department of Mental Health (DMH) have made a significant positive impact on police responses, adding that police departments that have not yet participated could benefit from the experience. She added that universal trainings for all officers would be a great initiative for the state to implement.

DYS and DCF in partnership: Detained & Committed Youth

Ms. Polizzano then welcomed Ms. Moore, Senior Director of Community Operations at DYS to begin presenting on DYS and DCF in Partnership: Detained and Committed youth.

Ms. Moore introduced herself and her work, sharing that her expertise lies with the post-commitment phase of the juvenile justice system.

Ms. Moore provided an overview of her presentation agenda and began presenting on DYS's role at the detention stage.

Ms. Moore then presented on DYS's role at the commitment stage, sharing that youth are assigned the same caseworker for the entirety of their time at DYS. She emphasized that it would be great to reimagine the continuum of DYS services, which is an initiative that has been in progress over the past year, with the goals of serving youth longer and better in the community. She also added that family partners and a transitional clinician are make up some of the DYS team that is part of the community services network (CSN). While discussing the Youth Engaged in Services (YES) program, she shared that about 70% of young people opt into YES, which speaks to the strong relationships they build with staff during their time in commitment.

Ms. Moore then shared information on the pretrial detention MOU between DYS and DCF and how the two agencies communicate about kids who are involved with both of them, including:

- Notification of DCF youth held in detention
- DCF sharing all relevant information with DYS
- Weekly population review meetings
- Clinical staff coordination and communication
- Training

Ms. Moore shared highlights of bright spots related to the MOU relationship, including:

- Well established points of contact
- Regular participation in population meetings
- Prompt notification of dually-involved youth

Finally, Ms. Moore shared some of the challenges related to the MOU, including:

- Lack of placement options
- Youth access to community-based caring adults while in detention
- Cross-agency understanding / turnover; enhance training opportunities
- Specificity in meeting agendas, required records and timelines

She also made a recommendation to update the MOU and recirculate it to relevant parties.

Ms. Moore welcomed questions on the information she presented.

One member shared that youth who do not have contact with caring adults while in DYS is an important issue. They also shared an experience of witnessing miscommunication with DCF about what services youth can receive while in *detention* versus *commitment*. The members emphasized that stakeholders should help DCF staff understand the nuances of the different cases. Ms. Moore suggested creating a list of questions to ask first when DCF is notified about a youth involved with DYS to understand what services may be provided. For example: “Does the child have a caseworker? Are they committed or detained?”

One member shared that it could be helpful to explore successful models from other jurisdictions that ensure youth in detention or commitment remain connected to caring adults in their communities. They added that there is a misconception that kids need to be isolated from their communities in order to be rehabilitated, which is not always the case. Ms. Moore responded that identifying existing relationships with trusted adults is an important first step in maintaining that connection.

One member shared the importance of training staff on the sexual exploitation of girls who are systems-involved in order to be proactive about the issue.

One member shared that it would be interesting to think about the issue of community connection in DYS in the same way case managers think about permanency planning in DCF.

One member asked when the previously mentioned trend away from youth in DYS crossing over into DCF started. Ms. Todd shared that this change happened in tandem with the education around the dangers of detention and efforts to decriminalize teen behaviors, nearly 20 years ago. She added that changing minds and practice can take time, which is why impacts can be delayed.

One member asked if other providers had robust training protocols like NFI does. Ms. Todd shared the larger providers are in line with NFI's standards, but some of the smaller ones may not have the resources to be as thorough. She added that it would be great to have a centralized training academy so that all providers had the same trainings.

Ms. Polizzano shared that the OCA uses members' ideas about conducting national scans on specific subject areas to inform future presentations and encouraged them to continue to bring new ideas for research to the group.

Next Steps

Ms. Polizzano shared that the next meeting of the CBI subcommittee will take place virtually on Monday, June 23 at 11:00AM, during which DCF will present information to inform the group's dually involved youth project.

Closing Comments

Ms. Polizzano thanked the members for their participation and adjourned the meeting.

Meeting adjourned: 12:28 PM