

Office of the Child Advocate
Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board
Community Based Interventions Subcommittee
Monday, February 24, 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)
Brian Blakeslee (CPCS)
Jamie Bennett (YAD)
Thula Sibanda (DYS)
Rachel Wallack (Juvenile Court)
Julia Andrus (DCF)
Juin Liu (DESE)
Alton Jones (CLM)
Laura Miller (MDAA)

OCA Staff:

Melissa Threadgill
Kristi Polizzano
Morgan Byrnes
Kerin Miller

Other Attendees:

Kathleen Bitetti (OSA)
Josh Quirk (NAMI)
Jennifer Hallisey (MassHealth)
Erin Stewart

Meeting Commenced: 11:02 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 November Meeting:

Ms. Polizzano held a formal vote on the approval of the previous Community Based Interventions meeting minutes. Kimberly Lawrence, Thula Sibanda, Brian Blakeslee, Rachel Wallack, Melissa, Threadgill, and Leon Smith all voted to approve the minutes. Julia Andrus and Alton Jones abstained. No one opposed.

The meeting minutes for November 20, 2024 were approved.

Ms. Polizzano then presented the meeting agenda, which included OCA Announcements and updates on the Dually Involved Youth project.

OCA Announcements

Ms. Polizzano stated that the Pretrial Report was published and submitted to the legislature in January 2025. Ms. Polizzano explained that the OCA will monitor implementation of the Board's recommendations, provide updates on relevant initiatives/legislation when possible, and present the Pretrial Report to the Criminal Justice Reform Caucus in March. The JJPAD Board will vote on the Annual JJPAD report in its March meeting.

Ms. Polizzano shared that DYS is expanding the MYDP to two additional counties in 2025 – Suffolk and Norfolk – totaling 9 out of 11 court counties.

Ms. Polizzano welcomed questions and reactions from members. Members expressed excitement regarding MYDP expansion. Ms. Threadgill added that new counties and stakeholders are eager to offer diversion programming.

CBI 2025 Work Plan

Ms. Polizzano presented the CBI 2025 Work Plan for the Dually Involved Youth (DIY) project, which has progressed alongside the Pretrial Project. Thus far, the OCA has conducted key stakeholder interviews and submitted data requests to DCF and DYS.

Ms. Polizzano shared a working definition for Dually Involved Youth (DIY) and noted that the definition may evolve to align with data definitions and research. Ms. Polizzano also noted that members' feedback will shape the national research and upcoming activities. Upcoming activities include DYS, DCF, and provider presentations; national research; data findings; best practices; draft findings; and draft recommendations.

Ms. Polizzano welcomed questions and reactions to the work plan. Hearing none, Ms. Polizzano reviewed the research methods that have been completed so far.

Dually Involved Youth: Project Update and Discussion

Ms. Polizzano welcomed Ms. Byrnes to review the guiding research questions and major themes from stakeholder interviews.

Ms. Byrnes shared the interview findings and themes for each research question, including:

1. Why do youth with DCF involvement become involved in the MA juvenile justice system?
2. What, if any, gaps in process/system/services exist in MA to adequately support youth pre- and post- dual involvement?

3. How can the state better support youth/stakeholders/the system to prevent cross-over or, in cases where prevention is not possible, better support youth with concurrent DCF & DYS involvement?

Ms. Byrnes explained that the presentation includes responses from 68 interviews, representing 97 stakeholders statewide from August 2023- February 2025. Ms. Brynes noted that responses may require additional investigation, highlight localized or regional gaps, and account for geographical differences in interpretation and implementation.

Why do youth with DCF involvement become involved in the MA juvenile justice system?

Ms. Byrnes then shared interview themes related to the first research question, including:

1. Lack of services/resources for youth and their families
2. Low supply of out of home DCF placement options
3. System response to youth with DCF involvement's risk-taking behavior

Ms. Byrnes identified that a lack of services/resources is outside of the Board's scope, given that the Board's working definition of DIY presumes system involvement. However, Ms. Byrnes noted that it is important to consider the factors that may contribute to system involvement to contextualize the problem. Interviewees cited a lack of upstream services as a contributing factor for system involvement and a low supply of DCF placement options as a reason why youth become system involved and cannot be diverted away from detention. Lastly, interviewees noted that risk taking in adolescence is developmentally appropriate. Interviewees stressed that the way in which the system and its various actors respond to youth involved with DCF involvement is what produces different outcomes compared to youth without DCF involvement, and a lack of available resources (such as placement options) makes it difficult to divert youth away from detention or the system entirely.

Ms. Byrnes welcomed questions on the information presented.

Members discussed how each youth has a different threshold for behaviors and how providers' assessment of aggressive behaviors is subjective depending on the youth's individual behaviors and treatment needs. Ms. Byrnes shared that interviewees that are providers acknowledged the complexity of assessing behavior and explained how the safety of the youth, staff, and others in care is often considered. Members also discussed how trauma and trauma responses are stigmatized for DCF youth. Members commented on the effects and potential placement implications of labeling a youth when they have not been adjudicated delinquent.

Members also highlighted the need for specialized programs and supports for certain cohorts, specifically CSEC youth.

Lastly, members identified cross-agency efforts between DCF and DYS to address DIY. One member offered a specific scenario where Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) protocols related to bail and bail practices were complicated when put into practice with families. Members suggested exploring gaps in the implementation of cross-agency protocols.

What, if any, gaps in process/system/services exist in MA to adequately support youth pre- and post- dual involvement?

Ms. Byrnes then shared interview themes related to the second research question. Ms. Byrnes noted that gaps appear at multiple stages of system involvement and responses may vary by region:

- During pretrial detention, interviewees cited a lack of clear communication practices/pathways, role clarity, and information sharing (including administrative, clinical, and case information) between DCF and DYS. Interviewees also expressed frustration when pretrial detention is used in lieu of DCF placement. Ms. Byrnes commented on the transient nature of detention and its impact on timely services and supports, such as a youth's education.
- During post-adjudication commitment, interviewees identified delays in information sharing and collaboration between DCF and DYS, DCF placement challenges, (specifically when youth are transitioning from residential to community placement), and a low supply of DCF placement options exacerbated by DCF placements' right to refuse referrals. Interviewees expressed frustration when DCF closes a case or caseworkers become less engaged when the youth is in residential commitment. Ms. Byrnes clarified that DCF will close a Child Requiring Assistance (CRA) case, but not a Care and Protection case, when a youth is committed to DYS.
- During Youth Engaged in Services (YES)/Transition Age Youth (TAY) voluntary phase, interviewees shared frustration over a lack of alignment between DYS YES program and DCF TAY sign-on services.

Ms. Byrnes welcomed questions on the information presented. Members discussed the nuance of closing a DCF case (i.e., court-ordered custody versus an open case, generally) when a youth is committed to DYS, suggesting that practices may vary by region.

Members discussed how placement instability leads to educational disruption, especially for youth with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). One member referenced an audit on DYS' special education services. Ms. Byrnes noted that DYS tracks education data during the detention and commitment phase.

How can the state better support youth/stakeholders/the system to prevent cross-over or, in cases where prevention is not possible, better support youth with concurrent DCF & DYS involvement?

Ms. Byrnes then detailed interview themes related to the third research question. Ms. Byrnes shared that interviewees were eager to identify specific intervention points and opportunities for change. Interviewees' ideas were organized by process point:

- Prior to dual-involvement, interviewees suggested more DCF placement options (specifically for kin and non-kin foster homes), acute short-term treatment/respite options, and upstream services. Interviewees mentioned eliminating the CRA system as well as the time limits from Family Stabilization Services (FSS) and increasing funding for congregate care as well as training for DCF caseworkers (specifically related to adolescents and emerging adults).
- During pretrial detention, interviewees mentioned expanding DYS Community Based Options, addressing a provider's right to refuse a referral, modifying bail and placement policies and practices, and improving cross-agency collaboration through staffing and cost-sharing mechanisms.
- During post-adjudication commitment, interviewees discussed placement options, including DYS "step-down" programs and processes, specialty programs for girls, and more independent living options.
- During the YES/TAY phase, interviewees cited the need for more transitional housing and suggested youth should have the option to dual-enroll in DYS' YES program and DCF's TAY sign-on services. Ms. Byrnes clarified that neither DCF nor DYS has a policy that prevents dual enrollment.

Ms. Byrnes noted that the responses represented all stakeholders interviewed, and the Board's priorities will shape recommendations. Ms. Byrnes welcomed questions on the information presented.

Members discussed co-location, the practice of placing a youth engaged with DYS in the same home as a DCF youth, and the opportunity it presents to address workforce issues and a lack of placement options, despite its historical unpopularity. Members discussed the need for DYS to offer a greater continuum of care to meet the varying needs of youth at different stages of treatment.

One member asked for clarification regarding DCF training. Ms. Byrnes and Ms. Threadgill clarified that interviewees were referring to training on adolescents and emerging adults. Ms. Threadgill noted that DCF caseworkers may have caseloads across age groups, and some caseworkers have skills that skew to a certain age cohort. Ms. Threadgill also acknowledged that DCF has Adolescent Specialists with skills that should be leveraged in this work.

Members discussed how placement instability and waitlists disrupt or prevent appropriate treatment. Members discussed how a youth's treatment and service history may be presented differently to the court based on the youth's representation and custody situation. One member

suggested training to help Judges develop a more clinical lens on the information presented to the court.

Ms. Byrnes opened the floor to general reactions and topics of interest.

One member questioned the gender distinction when identifying services and supports. Ms. Byrnes explained that interviewees believed that girls in the deeper end of the system had complex histories and needs. A member from DYS noted that there are gendered differences to trauma expression and trauma treatment, and the risk profile for girls tends to be lower. DYS has an ongoing initiative to revamp the continuum of services for girls to address their unique treatment needs.

Members discussed how child welfare and juvenile justice systems are state-based, affecting state-to-state comparisons. Ms. Byrnes explained that the Board will carry a consistent definition of DIY throughout its reporting, and the national scan will look at other jurisdictions to identify practices or key learnings that are feasible for Massachusetts.

Members discussed the different ways that DCF can engage with a family – with or without involving the court. Members reflected on the complexities of defining dually involved youth.

Next Steps

Ms. Polizzano shared that the next meeting of the CBI subcommittee will take place virtually on Monday, March 24 at 11:00AM. The next few meetings will focus on agency policies and practice as well as a dive into the national research.

Closing Comments

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

Meeting adjourned: 12:21 PM