

Office of the Child Advocate
Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board
Community Based Interventions Subcommittee
Thursday July 15, 2021
1:00pm – 2:30pm
Meeting held virtually

Subcommittee Members or Designees Present:

Karin Orr (DMH)
Migdalia Nalls (CPCS)
Amy Ponte (CAFL/CPCS)
Leon Smith (CfJJ)
Dawn Christie (Parent Representative)
Barbara Wilson (CLM)
Nokuthula Sibanda (DYS)
Brian Jenney (DPH)

Other Attendees:

Melissa Threadgill (OCA)
Kristi Polizzano (OCA)
Alix Rivière (OCA)
Judy Touzin (OCA intern)
Marcela Familia-Bolanos (OCA intern)
Ayanna Miller-Smith (OCA intern)
Shayna Simmonds (Field Service Coordinator – Probation)
Ali Ireland (DMA Health Strategies)
Sally Amilcar (DMA Health Strategies)
Jinna Halperin (DMA Health Strategies)
Matt Pecoraro (Judge Baker Children’s Center)
Kathleen Bitetti (SAO)
Other Members of the public

Meeting Commenced: 1:03pm

Welcome and Introductions

Ms. Threadgill welcomed the attendees to the Community Based Interventions (CBI) subcommittee virtual meeting. She introduced all the individuals in the WebEx video conference and individuals on the phone introduced themselves. She then presented the agenda.

Review and Approval of Minutes from June 2021 Meeting

Ms. Threadgill held a formal vote on the approval of the previous Community Based Interventions meeting minutes. No one was opposed or abstained from voting on the June minutes. The meeting minutes for June 17, 2021 were approved.

Planning Discussion re: CRA Youth and Parent/Caregiver Focus Group

DMA Health Strategies presented their goals and ideas regarding the CRA youth and parent/caregiver focus groups they will be conducting in the fall. Ms. Halperin explained that they plan on scheduling four focus groups, two with youth ages 14 and up and two with parents/caregivers. She went over some of the details regarding consent forms, compensation for participation, and use of interpreters. To recruit participants, DMA Health Strategies will seek support from the Children and Family Law (CAFL) division of the Committee for Public Counsel Services (CPCS) and Family Resource Centers (FRCs).

Members suggested parent organizations that could be invaluable in recruiting as well as subcommittee members helping with distribution of flyers to recruit. The group discussed ways to segment participants (e.g. current/former CRA status, CRA type, FRC involvement). Members mentioned outcome from CRA (e.g. out-of-home placement) and status of CRA (formal/informal) could be good ways to segment participants.

The group then discussed topics and questions that would be examined during the focus groups, including social/emotional issues, impact of race on CRA status, as well as the role of FRCs, schools, and the courts. Members also mentioned services (specifically youth's experience of the services they received and access), DCF involvement, and possible connection with delinquency cases.

Presentation by Judy Touzin on Truancy CRAs: Prevention and Intervention

Judy Touzin, a summer Rappaport fellow at the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), presented her research and preliminary recommendations on truancy CRAs. First, she presented the project's goal to offer recommendations that will reduce the use of truancy-based CRAs by ensuring youth and families across the state receive timely and effective supports. She then gave an overview of truancy and state regulations on a national level and main drivers for student truancy at the child, family, school, and community level. She then presented promising practices for truancy prevention, such as multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS), simplifying communication to help families understand how the youth's absences might impact them (i.e. fewer word count and simplified language level), and school-community collaboration (e.g. Project Start).

Next, Ms. Touzin delved into Massachusetts' context. She presented data on truancy CRAs by county and noted that truancy CRAs from Bristol, Norfolk, and Hampshire/Franklin counties represented about a third of their total CRAs, and Suffolk Counties' truancy CRAs represented over half of their total CRA filings. She explained that the average age of a youth with a truancy CRA is 14.2 years old, suggesting the need for sound truancy prevention programs in elementary and middle school. She then went over the role of Massachusetts' Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) in truancy prevention program implementation and explained that it is unclear which schools have implemented prevention programs, despite DESE's guidance. She noted that feedback from interviewees was that these guidance were not always clear.

Next, she discussed prevention and intervention practices across school districts in the state, which may include letters sent home, attendance committee meetings, home visits, case managed by School Adjustment Counselors, etc. Truancy prevention personnel vary greatly from district to district, depending on resources. Roles may include assistant principals, attendance officers, school clerks, School Adjustment Counselors, and School Resource Officers. She then shared promising practices from different schools in the Commonwealth, including:

- Fonseca Elementary and Fitchburg High who have a tiered approaches.
- Barnstable and Worcester Counties who hold stakeholder meetings to discuss attendance concerns/reasons and develop a plan in collaboration with all concerned.
- Fall River County who has a monthly Attendance Task Force.
- Taunton school district who strives to cultivate a culture of care and belonging by promoting prosocial activities and connections and ensuring that CRAs are filed as a last result.

Ms. Touzin then shared emerging themes. In terms of what works, she mentioned ongoing communication and collaboration; monitoring, identifying, and intervening early; orientation toward support, not punishment; and getting to the "why" behind truancy. In terms of key barriers, she mentioned that there is no statutory or regulatory guidance on what truancy prevention efforts should look like; there is no data by school/school district; FRCs are often engaged late in the process; partnerships between stakeholders vary widely; and there are inadequate translation and transportation services for families.

Finally, she discussed potential recommendations:

1. Provide more direct guidance and support to set a vision for stakeholder collaboration and model prevention practices.
2. Increase data visibility to allow more targeted and timely intervention by disaggregating data by race, ethnicity, gender, school and district level as well cross-referencing with attendance, suspension, discipline and delinquency court referral data. Members added the need to track IEP data.
3. Require robust intervention before filing a CRA by defining and strengthening the process and practices.

Closing Comments:

Ms. Threadgill thanked the presenters and members for their participation. She informed the group that the next meeting will take place on Thursday, September 16th from 1:00pm to 2:30pm.

Meeting adjourned: 1:19pm