

Office of the Child Advocate
Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board
Community Based Interventions Subcommittee
Thursday, July 21, 2022
1:00PM-2:30PM
Meeting held virtually

Subcommittee Members or Designees Present:

Amy Ponte (CAFL)
Karin Orr (DMH)
Thula Sibanda (DYS)
Susan Gil-Hickey (DMH)
Leon Smith (CfJJ)
Brian Jenney (DPH)
Rachel Wallack (Juvenile Court)
Rachel Gwaltney (CLM)
Brian Blakeslee (CPSC)
Kimberly Lawrence (Probation)
Dawn Christie (Parent)
Barbra Wilson (CLM)
Migdalia Nalls (CPCS)

OCA Staff:

Melissa Threadgill
Kristi Polizzano
Alix Rivière
Jess Seabrook
Morgan Byrnes

Other Attendees:

Jenyka Spitz-Gassnola (DYS)
Katie Perry-Lorentz (DYS)
Kathleen Bitetti (SAO)
Daniele Rose (DYS)
Jillie Santos (CfJJ)
Liz Roccoforte (CfJJ)
Krystyna Boisjolie (RFK Community Alliance)
Michael Kilkelly
Aaron Younge
Shayna Simmons (Probation)

Other Members of the public

Meeting Commenced: 1:02 PM

Welcome and Introductions:

Ms. Polizzano welcomed the attendees to the Community Based Interventions (CBI) Subcommittee virtual meeting. She then presented the agenda, explaining the group would briefly review the preliminary CRA report findings discussed in June, discuss possible recommendations for improvement to the CRA system after reviewing and voting on June's meeting minutes.

Review and Approval of Minutes from the June Meeting:

Ms. Polizzano held a formal vote on the approval of the previous Community Based Interventions meeting minutes. Amy Ponte, Susan Gil-Hickey, Kimberly Lawrence, Karin Orr, Brian Blakeslee, Brian Jenney, Rachel Wallack, Rachel Gwaltney and Thula Sibanda voted to approve the minutes. No one abstained or opposed.

The meeting minutes for June 16, 2022, were approved.

Recap of Draft CRA Report Findings:

Prior to beginning the review, Ms. Threadgill announced that the Department of Youth Services (DYS) had just posted a Request for Response (RFR) for two new Diversion Learning Lab sites. She welcomed members to share the information out to their networks.

Ms. Polizzano then recapped the seven draft CRA Report findings. Members provided edits to the language to better communicate the group's primary finding that formal court involvement is not an appropriate place to access services for most youth.

Discussion on Recommendations for Improvements to the CRA system

Ms. Polizzano explained that these recommendations are the culmination of the group's study into the CRA system, and the conversations had during subcommittee meetings. Based on the group's finding that there is currently no shared understanding or goal of what the current CRA system is, Ms. Polizzano presented the following draft goal that could be recommended by the group:

- The goal of Massachusetts' CRA system is to provide children and families with the necessary supports to be successful in their home, school and community with as little court intervention as possible. A successful system would connect youth and families to needed supports, reserve the formal CRA process for cases requiring multidisciplinary case conferencing team and prevents future juvenile justice and child welfare involvement.

Members suggested edits, including adding language to clarify that the prevention of a formal CRA case is also an overall goal. Members also suggested adding language to describe the formal CRA process as a failsafe and rename the multidisciplinary case conferencing team to avoid confusing it with the case conferencing meeting that is currently practiced.

Ms. Polizzano then presented on the following possible recommendations:

- There are two, not mutually exclusive, paths forward: the group could recommend eliminating part or all of the current CRA process, while building up school's truancy prevention programs and replacing the CRA court process with a referral system to the Family Resource Centers (FRC). Or the group could recommend substantially restructuring the current CRA system by expanding upstream support, increasing data availability, and reserving the formal CRA process as a failsafe.
- Expanding upstream supports could include increasing community service availability (expanding FRCs, the availability of mentoring/peer support and expanding mental health services), increasing school-based support (increasing and improving truancy prevention programs and access to educational advocates) and expanding education on the CRA process.
- Reserving the CRA system for youth could include requiring referrals to engage with FRCs before filing, requiring case conferencing, limiting cases that receive judicial hearings and restructure the petition types to be based on the requested supports for youth.
- Increasing data availability could include requiring data collection and reporting by school district on why the CRA was filed and increase cross-branch data collection and reporting.

Members discussed the recommendations, focusing on how they would impact the current availability (and lack) of services in the Commonwealth, as well as the current capacity of the FRCs. Members noted that any recommendation made that would increase the role FRCs played would have to also include language on increasing funding. Ms. Threadgill added that the ongoing effort from the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to increase behavioral health supports across the state would help increase the services needed as well.

Next, members discussed the importance of highlighting mechanisms that prevent youth and families from entering the formal CRA court process including requiring petitioners to meet certain requirements and creating a case conferencing team in the pre-filing phase that could take place at a local FRC.

Members discussed if any of the recommendations would create unnecessary barriers for families looking for immediate services. It was explained that when Connecticut eliminated their CRA system, connecting families to services became streamlined as getting youth and families connected to services was not delayed by the court process. Members agreed, noting that the new system should be focused on services, and creating infrastructure to allow for families to easily navigate and access them. One member noted that the recommendations made by the group reflect the need to make a "warm hand off" to FRCs, rather than just providing families with the information and not assisting them in making the connection. Members agreed, mentioning that

this was especially important with high needs, complex cases such as ones where parents are seeking a Department of Children and Families (DCF) placement for their child.

Members then discussed requiring a multidisciplinary meeting pre-filing. Ms. Threadgill mentioned that under the CHINS law, this was commonplace, and that many stakeholders in their interviews mentioned that the practice needed to be reinstituted. One member suggested that the group should be more prescriptive in this recommendation and also connect it the mandate that referrers need to engage with FRCs prior to filing. Members discussed how to incorporate this while also bolstering upstream services and centering the family on any solutions and services recommended.

Finally, members discussed increasing data, with one member noting that the group should recommend collecting data on youth and family satisfaction with the system/process. Members discussed creating an exit survey for families accessing the CRA system.

Ms. Polizzano thanked members for their discussion and explained that a draft report incorporating their discussion would be reviewed and discussed at the September meeting.

Closing Comments:

Ms. Polizzano thanked the members for their participation and informed the group that the next meeting will take place on September 15, 2022.

Meeting adjourned: 2:28 PM