

Office of the Child Advocate
Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board
Community Based Interventions Subcommittee
Monday, June 23, 2025
11:00 AM – 12:30 PM
Meeting held virtually

Subcommittee Members or Designees Present:

Kimberly Lawrence (Probation)
Leon Smith (CfJJ)
Dawn Christie (Parent)
Thula Sibanda (DYS)
Alton Jones (CLM)
Laura Miller (MDAA)
Rebecca Brink (DCF)
Juin Liu (DESE)
Jamie Bennett (YAD)
David Whitman (EOHHS)
Brian Blakeslee (CPCS)
Rachel Wallack (Juvenile Court)
Daniel Wolski (Massachusetts Chiefs of Police Association)

OCA Staff:

Melissa Threadgill
Kristi Polizzano
Kerin Miller
Alix Riviere
Morgan Byrnes
Chrisotpher Baidoo

Other Attendees:

Kim Occhiuti (DCF)
Candic Gemski (DCF)
Daijah Scott (CfJJ)
Jianna Diaz (CfJJ)
Emma Breen (SAO)
Christina Paskewicz (MACA)
Kathleen Bitetti (OSA)
Josh Quirk (NAMI)
Jennifer Hallisey (MassHealth)

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. Ms. Polizzano

introduced Christopher Baidoo, a Rappaport Policy Fellow working with the OCA’s Policy and Implementation Team. Ms. Polizzano also welcomed the newest JJPAD member, Chief Daniel Wolski of the Massachusetts Chiefs of Police Association.

Review and Approval of Minutes from the April Meeting:

Ms. Polizzano held a formal vote on the approval of the previous Community Based Interventions meeting minutes. Laura Miller, Dawn Christie, Jamie Bennett, Rebecca Brink, Kimberly Lawrence, Alton Jones, and Brian Blakeslee all voted to approve the minutes. Rachel Wallack abstained. No one opposed.

The meeting minutes for April 28, 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 a guest presentation from the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

OCA Announcements

Ms. Polizzano welcomed Melissa Threadgill to speak on OCA announcements. Ms. Threadgill highlighted a current bill in the state house, *An act regarding families and children in need of assistance* (S.141/H.265), which seeks to implement many of the recommendations from the JJPAD’s 2022 report “Improving Massachusetts’s Child Requiring Assistance System”. The bill is scheduled for a hearing in early July. The OCA is also working on an updated CRA report detailing data from 2023 and 2024, and related trends.

Ms. Polizzano welcomed questions regarding the OCA announcements. Hearing none, Ms. Polizzano welcomed guests from DCF.

DIY Project: Guest Presentations

Department of Children and Families: “Crossover Youth” Presentation

Ms. Polizzano introduced Ms. Gemski, the Deputy Commissioner of Clinical Services at DCF and Support, and Ms. Occhiuti, the Director of the Office of Management Planning and Analysis at DCF, and welcomed them to begin presenting.

Ms. Gemski presented the definition of crossover youth as it relates to this project and clarified that youth involvement may not mean a youth is in DCF’s *custody*. Ms. Gemski shared baseline data, including the fact that DCF is involved with 33,000 children across the Commonwealth, and 6,500 youth under age 18 are in DCF placement. 1,800 youth over age 18 are involved with DCF, and close to 80% of youth choose to remain involved within DCF upon turning 18.

Ms. Occhiuti then introduced the data considerations when reviewing DIY metrics. Ms. Occhiuti explained that DCF uses Master Data Management (MDM) office to match DCF and DYS

youth. Ms. Occhiuti further explained that case type and custody status are not documented within MDM. This means youth identified through that data have varying levels of DCF involvement. Next, Ms. Occhiuti presented two different data models to demonstrate how including youth on a DCF pending response captures a larger cohort of DIY than a model including only youth only on DCF cases open for service. Ms. Occhiuti highlighted the importance of clear data definitions, especially as it relates to identifying specific cohorts of DIY. Ms. Occhiuti noted that manual matches produce more accuracy than MDM matches due to discrepancies in data entry and the timing of the data entry

Next, Ms. Gemski spoke about the training DCF provides for staff working with adolescents. New hires at DCF receive training on Adolescent Engagement and Assessment during onboarding. Ms. Gemski highlighted additional training on adolescent-related topics offered regularly to staff. Ms. Gemski also noted that DCF has an Adolescence Unit of DCF staff who work specifically with adolescents and young adults.

Ms. Gemski then addressed key policies that guide DCF's interventions with adolescents. She outlined the Missing or Absent Policy, which provides the blueprint for staff engagement with youth in the department's custody who might be "missing or absent." The term "missing" is reserved for youth whose whereabouts are unknown. Ms. Gemski shared that DCF engages key partners such as police, family members, the placement provider, and other agencies involved with the youth, as necessary, to help locate the youth. Ms. Gemski explained that the term "absent" is reserved for youth that have left DCF's approved placement but their whereabouts are known and they are unwilling to return to care or placement. She clarified that absent youth are often with kin or friends who have not been authorized as placement, and DCF works to engage the youth to return to care. Ms. Gemski recognized the need for specialized staff to work with youth who have difficulty engaging and shared that each region has missing and absent staff to engage this population.

Ms. Gemski discussed the key elements of the Department's Permanency Planning policy as it relates to adolescent interventions and services. She mentioned how youth in DCF's care or custody who do not reach permanency by age 18 can voluntarily sign-on for DCF services. DCF workers engage with youth starting at ages 14 – 16 to discuss the transition to adulthood and the benefits of continuing DCF services. Ms. Gemski also explained that there is a cohort of youth who turn 18 while in DCF custody and in a DYS facility who express interest in continuing services. In such cases, DCF collaborates with DYS to coordinate placement and the continuation of services. Lastly, she stated that young adults who were in DCF's custody and opted out of DCF post-18 services can seek voluntary DCF services until their 22nd birthday.

Ms. Gemski then provided an overview of the interventions and supports for youth in DCF custody. She highlighted how DCF social workers ensure frequent contact with families and make service referrals in partnership with caregivers. Next, Ms. Gemski elaborated on the CRA Pilot Programs. This pilot is a partnership between the Juvenile Court and DCF in three counties

with the goal of supporting youth through the CRA system by using DCF-facilitated stabilization services to avoid automatic out-of-home placement. Lastly, Ms. Gemski elaborated on the work of the Adolescent Outreach Unit. The Adolescent Unit works with young adult populations in DCF's custody, providing support such as achieving a driver's license and applying for college.

Ms. Gemski then discussed supports within the community. She highlighted DCF referrals to community-based therapeutic services, such as mental health supports and youth mentors. She also identified family engagement, school engagement, and collaborations with other state partners involved with the youth as key community supports.

Ms. Gemski then provided an overview of DCF's placement policy and practices. Ms. Gemski detailed DCF's continuum of placement including kin placement, unrelated foster care, comprehensive foster care, and congregate care facilities. Ms. Gemski noted DCF's commitment to seek the least restrictive placement whenever possible and explained DCF's priority to engage kin and supportive adult figures, highlighting that 41% of youth are placed with kin. Ms. Gemski also discussed DCF's infrastructure of placement meetings in most area offices to ensure the search for kin is robust and that youth are kept within their community, whenever possible. Ms. Gemski stated that DCF placements are staff secure, not hardware secure, and that the placement landscape is complicated for youth with behavioral issues that may require short term placement remedies.

Ms. Gemski then introduced the role of the DCF Regional Placement Coordinators. Ms. Gemski explained that DCF has five geographic regions, and each region has a Regional Placement Coordinator supervised by the Regional Director. She explained that the DCF Regional Placement Coordinator serves as DYS's point of contact for the region's DIY who are committed or detained, acts as a liaison to interpret and explain the DCF system to DYS and vice versa, and serves as the DCF representative at DYS regional standing meetings.

Next, Ms. Gemski shared ideas for improving collaboration for DIY. She mentioned shared inter-agency collaborative meetings and training to understand services and the exploration of mirroring/sharing services to overcome barriers, understand payment rates and funding sources, and address resource challenges through braided funds.

Ms. Gemski then addressed current placement challenges. Ms. Gemski noted that there is a lack of short-term intensive emergency residence providers and how the placement search for some complex youth requires sustained attention and casting a wide net to include out of state providers. Ms. Gemski also noted that providers have identified challenges when placing complex youth with the following needs: youth with significant intellectual disabilities, adolescents with significant mental and/or behavioral challenges, and youth in either of the two previous categories with significant medical needs.

Ms. Gemski transitioned into discussing bright spots. She highlighted DCF's sustained efforts to increase placement with kin, increased engagement with the provider community around brainstorming and problem solving, and engagement with sister agencies in EOHHS.

Ms. Gemski welcomed questions about the information presented.

One member asked if Ms. Gemski could elaborate on the CRA pilot. Ms. Gemski explained that DCF worked with the courts and juvenile judges to redirect youth who come before the court on a CRA filing to the DCF area office for family support and stabilization services in an attempt to keep the youth in their home and without transferring custody to DCF. The member mentioned the Intercept Pilot through Youth Villages in Worcester and asked DCF to clarify their policy on office-to-office decision making regarding voluntary, CRA, and open referrals. Ms. Gemski detailed the different ways that a youth or family can become involved with DCF, including a 51A report of abuse or neglect, a court referral on a CRA matter, and/or a voluntary request for services in which a family approaches DCF for support.

One member highlighted DCF's statistic on kinship placement and questioned how Massachusetts's kinship placement rate compares to national or peer state rates. DCF indicated that they did not have information on comparison rates at this time. Ms. Gemski noted that kinship placements rates in the Commonwealth have been increasing over the past several years, and DCF's Agency Improvement Leadership Team has an initiative devoted to placement stability, focusing on disproportionality within kin placements. She also highlighted DCF's work with the National Center for Diligent Recruitment to determine how to continue to increase the number of kinship placements.

Ms. Threadgill discussed the misconception that youth who become DYS involved are all in out-of-home DCF placement. During the case file review that will inform this group's work, the OCA intends to explore placement, and placement-related themes, preceding DYS involvement. Ms. Threadgill then asked about the services that are available for intact families, particularly for youth with mental health challenges that may put them at risk of delinquent behavior. Ms. Gemski highlighted DCF's goal to provide as many services as possible, regardless of whether the child is in out-of-home placement or with their family. Ms. Gemski noted that all community services, including support and stabilization services, are available to youth at home. She then highlighted the IT enhancements of the new support and stabilization procurement that will allow area offices to see what services are available in their catchment area and what services are available in other catchment areas.

One member acknowledged the growing concerns amongst families and youth regarding citizenship status. This member questioned what discussions are happening at DCF regarding undocumented youth. Ms. Gemski shared that DCF has done a lot of work to educate and prepare families, including partnering with Family Resource Centers (FRC) to spread awareness including "Know Your Rights" campaign information. She also noted that through the 51A and

51B process, DCF has the ability to take kids into care, initially, and to work with families without having to go before the court. Rebecca Brink, Assistant Commissioner of DCF, added that DCF has worked with FRCs to promote caregiver affidavits. Ms. Brink explained how individuals can identify alternate caregivers on the caregiver affidavit and to help avoid unnecessary DCF involvement in the event of a caregiver detention or removal.

One member acknowledged how it is essential to minimize system interactions for DIY. This member asked if DCF provides any support on how to interact with ICE, and highlighted the circumstances of one youth over 18 who has been placed in a young adult program, and their status is in question. This member asked what services or resources are available to individuals in those circumstances..

For children in DCF custody without status, Ms. Gemski clarified that DCF is able to review the youth's circumstances and seek legal assistance. Ms. Gemski added that youth's circumstances are handled on a case-by-case basis. She also shared that DCF may be able to refer youth to a contracted attorney on a case-by-case basis

Ms. Polizzano thanked members for their questions. Ms. Polizzano posed the following question to the DCF presenters – if you had a magic wand, what would you do to address youth crossing over from DCF to DYS?

Ms. Gemski emphasized the importance of community-based prevention services that are accessible to families. She highlighted a few bright spots around the Commonwealth, including ROCA's work on restorative justice programming and youth gang involvement, and shared a magic wand related to replicating prevention work statewide. Ms. Occhiuti's response focused on data and the ability to categorize youth into more segments than what that data currently entails . For example, Ms. Occhiuti highlighted that youth previously adopted are a specific cohort that, if data indicated as such, might need different policy solutions than other cohorts of children. Ms. Occhiuti noted that more nuanced data will inform strategic policy decisions for specific cohorts of crossover youth.

Ms. Threadgill echoed Ms. Occhiuti's sentiments, sharing that a lack of post-adoptive supports was a theme of the CRA process and early DIY project interviews.

Ms. Brink highlighted additional bright spots. Ms. Brink noted that crossover youth often have intense education needs. She mentioned DCF's education legal services program which utilizes outside counsel for youth in custody with special education concerns. Ms. Brink highlighted how this program may pay dividends for crossover youth, as well.

Ms. Polizzano thanked the presenters and shared next steps for the DIY project. Next meeting, the CBI will take a deep dive into the national research to answer the following questions:

1. How does research define dually involved youth, and what is the national data prevalence of dual involvement?
2. Who is dually involved? What are the common risk factors and life experiences that contribute to dual involvement?
3. What are the common pathways to dual involvement? What systemic factors contribute to dual involvement?

Ms. Polizzano then highlighted the next steps for this group, noting that timelines are tentative. In the fall the CBI Subcommittee will review analysis of a dataset for two fiscal years representing youth who had both DYS and DCF involvement, as well as the OCA's case file review of some of the data. The Subcommittee will also discuss draft findings and considerations from other jurisdictions. In the winter, the Subcommittee will draft recommendations and a report for the board.

Next Steps

Ms. Polizzano shared that the next meeting of the CBI subcommittee will take place virtually on Monday, July 28 at 11:00AM.

Closing Comments

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

Meeting adjourned: 12:17 PM