

Office of the Child Advocate  
Juvenile Justice Policy and Data Board  
Community Based Interventions Subcommittee  
Thursday, September 16, 2021  
1:00PM-2:30PM  
**Meeting held virtually**

**Subcommittee Members or Designees Present:**

Migdalia Nalls (CPCS)  
Amy Ponte (CAFL/CPCS)  
Leon Smith (CfJJ)  
Thula Sibanda (DYS)  
Barbara Wilson (CLM)  
Brian Blakeslee (CAFL/CPCS)  
Brian Jenney (DPH)  
Kimberly Lawrence (Probation)  
Joshua Dohan (CPCS)  
Rachel Wallack (Juvenile Court)

**OCA Staff:**

Melissa Threadgill (OCA)  
Kristine Polizzano (OCA)  
Gabriel Sultan (OCA)

**Other Attendees:**

Shayna Simmonds (Probation)  
Krissy Williams (Berkshire DA's Office)  
Candice Gabrey (PPAL)  
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. Committee members and other attendees introduced themselves in the Zoom conference. Ms. Threadgill performed a tally to ensure that a proper quorum of committee members had been reached before reading the agenda for the meeting.

**Review and Approval of Minutes from July Meeting**

Ms. Threadgill held a formal vote on the approval of the previous Community Based Interventions meeting minutes. Amy Ponte, Brian Blakeslee, Kim Lawrence, Barbara Wilson,

Brian Jenney, Migdalia Nalls, and Thula Sibanda voted in favor of approving the minutes. No one was opposed or abstained. The meeting minutes for July were approved.

### **Learning Lab Update From DYS:**

Thula Sibanda from the Department of Youth Services (DYS) addressed the group and provided an update on the agency's Diversion Learning Lab initiative. She noted that the procurement and selection process for partner organizations was still ongoing but was able to provide a tentative start-date of mid-October for the community-based initiative. Dr. Sibanda was excited to share that all potential partner organizations have longstanding connections in the communities which they will be studying. Each partner organization will focus on a different referrer of diversion: police diversion, judicial referrals, and DA referrals. The studies will take place in three counties: Worcester, Essex, and Middlesex.

### **OCA Presentation on Processes for CRA-like Cases in Other Jurisdictions:**

Ms. Threadgill then introduced Ms. Polizzano who presented on the OCA's examination of CRA processes and best practices in New York, Washington State, Connecticut, and Midland, County, Michigan. The materials presented were the result of a months-long study by a Rappaport fellow at the OCA. Ms. Polizzano presented on key differences between the other jurisdictions' systems and Massachusetts' system. For example, some states emphasize filing a CRA only as a means to request out of home placement. Some jurisdictions do not accept school-based CRAs. A committee member added that Connecticut has recently removed all status offenses from the jurisdiction of the juvenile court and detailed how requests for services go through non-judicial offices at the local level in the state. Another committee member asked for more detail regarding the precise process of how a diversion decision is reached prior to a case reaching a juvenile judge. Ms. Threadgill noted that other states require more detailed documentation of the pre-judicial phases of state intervention and would follow up with peer states to obtain examples of the documentation they require. Another committee member suggested categorizing and triaging petitions based on the outcome being sought to require clear thought on the part of the petitioner as to what intervention would entail and look like.

### **CBI 2021 Work Plan Update:**

Ms. Threadgill then updated the group on the group's 2021 work plan. Future areas of inquiry include the role that the Children and Family Law Division of CPCS (CAFL) plays in CRA cases, the new congregate care models being employed by DCF, and the results of the youth and family focus group. She alerted the group that they should expect to shift from information gathering to recommendation development by early 2022 once committee members are comfortable with the level of available information and subject matter.

### **Discussion of CRA System Interviews:**

Ms. Threadgill provided an update and led the group in discussion of the trends discovered in a series of 82 interviews conducted with 15 stakeholder groups regarding the CRA system in Massachusetts. The interviews focused on how the CRA case process works based on the subject's point of view with the goal of gaining a comprehensive and holistic view of the process from multiple angles. Subjects identified strengths and weaknesses of the system and specific problem areas they felt needed to be addressed. Most interviews discussed recommendations for improvement. Ms. Threadgill noted that there was significant repetition across different stakeholder types.

One of the most common themes discussed was that the CRA system serves many juveniles and families with high needs, but that not all children and families which fall into the system fit into that category. Nearly every interview subject identified significant negative experiences with and opinions of CRA process but could also point to situations in which CRAs were beneficial. Many subjects were unclear as to whether the CRA process itself was helpful or whether the involvement of *particular individuals* who were brought in through the process was what produced the benefits. The most common strengths of the system were found to be its ability to bring together multiple agencies and service providers, to establish relationships with competent and caring professions, that it can inject a sense of urgency to providers and families in exigent situations, and that it decriminalized status offenses. Most interviewees felt that CRAs are best used as a last resort.

Ms. Threadgill shared that many interviewees identified significant weaknesses and inconsistencies at every stage of the CRA process. Subjects observed a lack of consistency driven by jurisdiction and individual agents working within the system. A lack of systemic knowledge seemed to be a pervasive theme among all stakeholders. There also seemed to be a misunderstanding as to what outcomes CRAs can produce for families which is rampant throughout the Commonwealth. There was also a strong sense among subjects that the adversarial process of formalized court proceedings was a poor fit for situations in which families are desperate for services. Committee members suggested further study to understand how pervasive the divergence problem is within the CRA system and to measure how well-informed particular stakeholder groups and key constituencies are as to what the process entails and can produce.

Subcommittee members noted that it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of a system in which there is no clear conception of a successful outcome. Committee members argued that key components of an ideal system include stronger service systems for high-need youth and crisis situations, increased awareness within the child-serving community as to what a CRA actually does, engagement with a family resource center prior to a CRA filing being made, better documentation about school interventions, and improved documentation at every stage of the process. Subcommittee members agreed that increasing the availability and usage rates of voluntary services for families in crisis is a high priority.

**Closing Comments:**

Ms. Threadgill thanked the presenters and members for their participation. She outlined upcoming meeting presentations from CAFL & DCF in October and November. She informed the group that the next meeting will take place on 10/21/2021 from 1:00PM to 2:30PM.

**Meeting adjourned: 2:22PM**