

Youth in Action



Juvenile Justice

Research & Advocacy
2012

Summary

The TNOYS Youth Research and Advocacy Committee is comprised of young adults ages 14 to 22 who have personal experience with mental health services and the juvenile justice system. Over the course of an academic school year, members of the committee conducted policy research, participated in advocacy training, and developed an agenda highlighting policy and programmatic changes they would like to see to promote the well-being of other young people and help youth stay on the right track. Their recommendations, are based on the issue areas they identified, are outlined below.

Areas of Exploration

Counseling Services
Court Process
Education, Employment & Life Skills
Family Conflict
Family Involvement
Intake & Screening Process
Psychiatric Services & Medication
Substance Abuse



Counseling Services

- Youth and their family members need more information about counseling and other mental health services that are available in the community.
- Counselors should be people who can relate to youth.
- Youth should be able to choose their counselor based on individual needs and relatability.
- Counselors should continue their relationship with youth throughout their involvement in the juvenile justice system. For example, counselors should be willing to visit youth when they are locked up.

Court Process

- Allow youth to speak in court. They should be able to tell their side of the story and offer an explanation for their behavior if necessary.
- Offer youth sufficient opportunities to talk with their parents over the phone when they are detained, prior to a court hearing. This will give them time to resolve conflicts with their parents and help ensure their parents will support them in the courtroom and upon release.
- Ensure that parents are involved in the adjudication process. If a parent does not appear willing to be involved, staff should work with that parent.

Education, Employment & Life Skills

- Ensure that educational opportunities to promote and develop vocational skills related to youths' strengths and interests are available.
- Youth should have access to reliable transportation to get to work and school.
- Youth should be provided with life skills and job training opportunities while in the system, as many face the reality of finding work difficult once they are released.
- Probation officers should work with youth to ensure that terms of their probation (for example, ankle monitors and meeting times) do not exclude them from participation in sports or other extracurricular activities. Those activities may be key to staying out of trouble.
- Assist youth with obtaining important identification documents and reaching milestones related to adulthood. For example, help youth complete driver's education and obtain a driver's license.
- Coordinate youths' educational curriculum while they are incarcerated, with the curriculum at their home school.
- Ease the transition for youth when they leave a correctional facility and return to their home school. For example, ensure that credits transfer, absences are not issued unfairly, and youth have assistance with re-enrolling in school.

Family Conflict

- Law enforcement should not automatically arrest youth because they have a record, when they get into a conflict with their parents.
- When law enforcement officers respond to a family conflict situation, they should let youth tell their side of the story.
- Youth should have access to respite care services for 24 hours after they get into a conflict with their parents so that everyone involved has an opportunity to cool down. Counseling services should accompany the respite care.
- Youth should be allowed to admit themselves into emergency shelters without parent/guardian approval.

Family Involvement

- Families should be given advance notice of court hearings when possible so they can arrange to be there.
- An orientation class / training to the system for parents or support groups for parents should be made available. The class should emphasize that parental support is extremely important for youth while they are involved in the system and are going through tough times.
- Parents should not label their children just because they have gotten into trouble with the law. They should try to help them. Youth want parents involved in their lives.
- A youth should not be detained longer than needed because his or her parents do not show up to court.
- Similarly, if a youth's parents do not show up for his or her release from a correctional facility, the youth should be placed at an emergency shelter. Youth should not have to remain at a correctional facility after they have completed their time because their parents fail to pick them up.

Family Involvement

- Youth should be given a clear explanation of the juvenile justice system and court process when they enter the system.
- Youth should be given a choice between completing screening instruments such as the MAYSI-2 either on the computer or with a counselor.
- The significance of the MAYSI-2 Screening Tool should be explained to youth prior to their taking it so that they understand the importance of being honest and forthcoming.

Psychiatric Services and Medication

- Labeling youth with a mental health condition should be a last resort after all other possible explanations for the youths' behavior (such as coping with challenging circumstances or negative experiences) have been considered.
- Psychiatrists should spend more time with youth and do a personalized assessment rather than just look at their file.
- Psychiatrists should make sure they fully explain mental health condition diagnoses and medications to youth, including side effects of medications.
- Programs should not mandate that youth take their medication in order to qualify for placement.

Substance Abuse

- Marijuana should be decriminalized.
- Drug tests should be randomized rather than offered on a schedule so that youth aren't able to game the system by using hard drugs (which exit their system more quickly than marijuana).
- Drug education programs should treat youth like mature individuals and offer youth real and scientific information about why they should not use drugs.
- Drug treatment programs should bring in peer educators or speakers who have used drugs in the past but gotten clean so that youth can network and relate with people who have been in similar circumstances.
- Drug treatment programs should hire staff who have used drugs in the past so youth can relate to them.
- Drug treatment programs should introduce youth to alternative coping strategies and extra-curricular activities to encourage more constructive behaviors.
- Youth who "test dirty" should be separated from youth who "test clean" during drug treatment classes since the scent of marijuana on another classmate may make staying clean challenging.
- Drug education classes should be constrained to a small group to ensure lots of opportunities for group discussion.
- Expand the length of drug treatment programs and connect youth to constructive alternatives for them after they leave the program.