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OPINION

Juvenile Justice Solutions Should Always Start with Positive Youth Development

by *Guest Writer* March 9, 2015
| *Guest Writer*

by David Muhammad

Since the creation of the first juvenile court in Chicago in 1899, our juvenile justice system has failed to reach its ultimate goal of treating and rehabilitating youth. The juvenile justice system in America suffers from high recidivism and failure rates, often causes further harm to youth, and has enormous costs.

An ideal youth justice system would be based on positive youth development (PYD), a strength- and asset-based, youth-involved development process.

“The basic premise of PYD is that even the most

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disadvantaged young person can develop positively when connected to the right mix of opportunities, supports, positive roles, and relationships,” wrote Dr. Jeff Butts of John Jay College of Criminal Justice in one of the [first reports](#) on “Positive Youth Justice.”

Building on young people’s strengths and providing them with services, supports, and opportunities is contrary to how the juvenile justice system has been operating for decades. Most juvenile justice agencies continue to operate in a deficit-based correctional system, where youth are seen as problems to be fixed or punished. This is why the best way to help youth is to get them out of the system or prevent them from entering in the first place.

In a December 2014 joint letter to state school directors and Attorneys General, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder wrote, “There is no doubt that reducing youth contact with the juvenile justice system is the most crucial step to promoting positive outcomes for youth.”

But there are some emerging practices to highlight. Below are a number of examples of juvenile justice agencies around the country that have successfully implemented PYD principles.

In California, both the San Joaquin and Yolo County Probation Departments follow this principle and have a policy that youth who have been assessed as low risk are not to be supervised. Even if the court places a low risk youth on probation, these departments will not actively supervise them.

Engaging youth and their families in their own case planning process is a significant PYD principle. Family Group Conferencing is a model that has been used in the child welfare system, and involves youth and their families in a group planning and decision making process.

Following are some examples of juvenile justice agencies around the country that have begun to



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utilize such models.

Washington, D.C.'s Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) develops and updates the case plans of all youth committed to the juvenile justice agency through a Youth and Family Team Meeting. The 2012 DYRS Annual Report gives a detailed description of how these youth and family team meetings are conducted:

“With all the appropriate assessments in hand, a meeting is called with the youth, the youth’s parents or guardians, the youth’s DYRS Case Manager, and any other adults who are invested in the young person’s success. The group reviews the youth’s assessments, considers his or her strengths and key needs, and then develops an individualized plan that outlines ongoing supervision, services, supports and opportunities the youth will need to successfully transition to adulthood and to reduce the likelihood of reoffending.”

After developing case plans with the youth and families involved, the plan must be appropriately resourced and implemented.

In 2011, the New York City Department of Probation launched the innovative Neighborhood Opportunity Networks (NeONs) to provide people on probation with a connection to services and supports in the neighborhoods they live in. These client-centered resource hubs have become a national model of how to transform probation practice.

Additionally, in 2009, DYRS in Washington, DC, contracted with two “Lead Entities” to administer Regional Service Coalitions, an alliance of community based organizations that are responsible for providing resources and support identified in the individual development plans of each youth committed to the Department. In 2011, the initiative was enhanced and renamed DC YouthLink.

DYRS states in its 2012 Annual Report, “We built DC YouthLink based on our belief that neighbors

and the community are often far better suited and more successful than government agencies at helping court-involved youth succeed in the community.”

The DC YouthLink model was inspired by the comprehensive transformation of the Wayne County, Mich., juvenile justice system. Wayne County decided to stop sending youth to the state system and launched a coalition of community service providers that would assume the responsibilities of supervision and services for adjudicated youth.

In an overview of its reforms, Wayne County’s juvenile justice system summarizes the essence of positive youth development, stating that their “new model’s commitment was to treat each individual youth as a person (within a family context) in need of opportunities and resources rather than a societal disease that needed to be contained.”

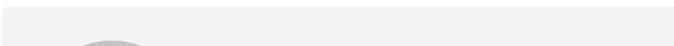
Recognizing that investing in young people by offering the supports, opportunities and services that will help them reach their full potential is the major shift needed for our country’s juvenile justice system to be successful and achieve its original goal.

David Muhammad is a technical assistance provider for the Sierra Health Foundation’s Positive Youth Justice Initiative. David is the director of national justice programs at the National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

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— *Guest Writer*

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