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Report No. 08-58

Pilot to Waive Fees for Delinquents Has Low Enrollment and Is Not Teaching Intended Skills

at a glance

As directed by the Legislature, the Department of Juvenile Justice established a pilot program in the 4th and 11th judicial circuits to waive parental fees for department supervision of delinquent youth if parents complete a designated parenting class. Because the pilot was not appropriated funding, DJJ selected vendors that already were operating classes with funding from other sources and were willing to include parents from the pilot at no cost to the parents or the department.

However, rather than teaching skills for parenting delinquents, as the Legislature intended, one course focuses on relationships and the other on marriage. Enrollment is low and there is little evidence that participation reduces recidivism of participants' children.

The pilot is scheduled to end in June 2009. If the Legislature wishes to continue the program, we recommend that it direct DJJ to implement an evidence-based program that teaches specific skills for parenting delinquents and charge parents to participate, as authorized by law.

Scope

Section 985.0395(3), *Florida Statutes*, directs OPPAGA to annually review the waiver pilot program administered by the Department of Juvenile Justice.¹

Background

The Legislature has authorized the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) to assess the parents of youth under its care and custody a fee to partly offset the costs of supervision.² These fees are \$5 per day for youth in secure detention and residential commitment facilities and \$1 per day for youth on non-residential commitment, home detention, aftercare, and probation. As youth can spend several months in programs these fees can be significant; for example, parents of a youth in a six-month residential program would be assessed \$900 in supervision fees.

The Legislature created a three-year pilot program that allows a one-time waiver of these fees for parents who complete a parenting course approved by the department.³ Parents who complete the course have all outstanding supervision fees waived retroactively, including those incurred for their child's prior offenses. In addition, all supervision and care fees for any siblings are also waived, and this waiver is also retroactive. However, payments already made are not refunded.

¹ See also OPPAGA [Report No. 07-34](#), *Pilot to Waive Fees for Parents of Delinquents Should Focus More on Parenting Skills*, August 2007.

² Section 985.039, *F.S.*

³ Section 985.0395, *F.S.*

The waiver program was piloted in the 4th Judicial Circuit (Clay, Duval, and Nassau counties) and the 11th Judicial Circuit (Miami-Dade County).⁴ The pilot was not appropriated funding. Instead, the Legislature authorized DJJ to charge parents to participate in the classes as a way to fund the pilot program. However, in an effort to encourage participation DJJ selected vendors that already were operating programs with funding from other sources and were willing to serve pilot parents at no cost to the participants or the department.

Prior Findings

OPPAGA’s 2007 review found that the pilot programs did not teach skills specific to parenting delinquents, as intended by the Legislature. In the 4th Judicial Circuit, DJJ entered into an agreement with Jacksonville’s Network for Strengthening Families to offer an eight-hour workshop designed to change family attitudes and improve interpersonal relationships. In the 11th Judicial Circuit, DJJ entered into an agreement with Trinity Church’s Peacemakers Family Service Center to offer a 14-hour parenting course based on the Strong Families curriculum. This course covers topics such as healthy relationships, family communication, money management, improving

⁴ The 4th Judicial Circuit program began in October 2006 and the 11th Judicial Circuit program began in January 2007.

Exhibit 1 Pilot Program Participation Remains Low

Measure	Circuit 4	Circuit 11
Number of delinquency cases in which fees were required to be ordered	3,507	4,296
Total amount of fees assessed in delinquency cases in which they were required to be ordered	\$802,062	\$1,147,068
Number of delinquency cases in which parents agreed to complete an approved parenting class	279	60
Number of delinquency cases in which the parent submitted notarized documentation of successful completion to the court	256 ¹	12
Number of delinquency cases in which the court entered an order waiving fees	256	9
Total amount of fees waived ²	\$159,222	\$214,668
Fees waived by Pilot	\$112,153	\$3,225

¹ There is a time lag between the course completion and fee waiver in Circuit 4 due in part to a month-long delay between the end of the course and graduation. In addition, the waiver order must be signed by a judge. Once a month, following the graduation ceremony, the director notarizes copies of the certificates and mails them to DJJ. The department then faxes each waiver certificate to the appropriate judge to obtain the required signature. Parents may thus continue to be billed for several months after completing the program.

² Judges may waive fees for other reasons such as indigence.

Source: Department of Juvenile Justice Office of Probation and Community Corrections.

self-esteem, recognizing abusive relationships, and personal accountability. Enrollment in these courses was low, especially in the 11th Judicial Circuit.

We recommended that DJJ implement an evidence-based program to teach skills for parenting delinquent adolescents and that the department could charge parents a fee, as authorized by s. 985.0395(2)(b), *Florida Statutes*, to pay the costs of developing such a program in the absence of a specific appropriation.

Current Status

DJJ has not implemented the recommendations from our 2007 report. It has continued to use the current programs, which have not been restructured to teach skills specific to parenting delinquent children. The department has elected not to charge parents to participate in the waiver pilot due to concerns that such fees would reduce participation.

As shown in Exhibit 1, participation in the program continues to be low. In the 4th Judicial Circuit, 279 families have enrolled in the program over its two and one-half years of operation, 8% of those eligible. In the 11th Judicial Circuit only 60 families have enrolled to date, 1% of those eligible.

Additionally, many families that have enrolled in the program have not submitted notarized documentation to the court that they successfully completed the courses. This is particularly a problem in the 11th Judicial Circuit, where only 12 of the 60 families (20%) who enrolled in the pilot program submitted such documentation. In the 4th Judicial Circuit most (91%) of enrolled families submitted documentation of course completion.

There is little evidence that parents' participation in the pilot classes reduces their children's recidivism.⁵ The low number of families who had documented course completion in 11th Judicial Circuit precludes comparison of recidivism outcomes. As shown in Exhibit 2, results were mixed in the 4th Judicial Circuit. Participants' children who had been placed in detention had slightly lower recidivism rates in the six months after release than non-participants' children. However, participants' children who were released from probation or residential commitment

had higher recidivism rates than children of non-participants. Such children typically have committed more extensive or serious delinquency offenses.

These results should be interpreted with caution due to the low number of participants. Nonetheless, the available data does not show that the fee waiver pilot program results in a significant improvement in juvenile justice outcomes.

As provided by s. 985.0395, *Florida Statutes*, the pilot will end June 30, 2009. Given these results, if the Legislature wishes to continue the fee waiver program, we recommend that it direct DJJ to implement an evidence-based program that teaches specific skills for parenting delinquent adolescents and charge parents to participate, as authorized by law. If the class teaches useful parenting skills that help families successfully address their children's delinquency, parents may be willing to participate even if there is a small fee.

⁵ Section 985.0395, *F.S.*, directs OPPAGA to provide this analysis.

**Exhibit 2
Recidivism Results for Children of Participants Are Mixed in the 4th Judicial Circuit**

Program	Fees	Youth Released ¹	Releases Referred for Delinquency ²	Recidivism Rate ³
Detention	Fees Waived	209	50	24%
	Fees Not Waived	3,286	1,036	32%
Probation	Fees Waived	72	15	21%
	Fees Not Waived	917	137	15%
Residential Commitment	Fees Waived	47	19	40%
	Fees Not Waived	805	218	27%

¹Youth may be released from multiple programs within the time period of analysis (October 1, 2006, through December 31, 2007), which would result in a larger number of participants than indicated in Exhibit 1.

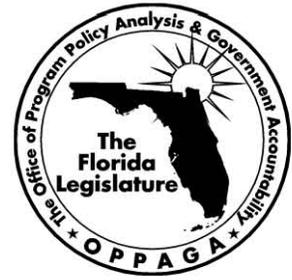
²Releases were calculated for a six-month period from the date of the child's release from the custody of DJJ. In the case of children whose parents completed the parenting class AFTER their child was released from the custody of DJJ, the six-month follow-up period used in the analysis begins on the date the parent(s) completed the parenting course.

³ Recidivism rate is calculated by dividing the number of releases referred for delinquency within six months, by the number of youth released from the supervision type (detention, probation or residential commitment) during the time period.

Source: Department of Juvenile Justice Office of Research and Planning.

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