

## Innovation Brief

# Effective Tools for Local/State Probation Offices

Since the creation of probation services involving youth offenders, juvenile probation has evolved with a fluctuating history involving both rehabilitation and enforcement roles. Even today, juvenile probation departments continue to vary significantly in their approaches. Some follow a more youth-oriented perspective while others mirror criminal justice methods more similar to adult probation practices. What remains constant are the lack of agreed upon best practices or models for probation practices. Seeking to better define effective probation practice and examine the associated outcomes, Louisiana probation departments, partnering with the MacArthur *Models for Change* initiative, reformed key practices that have resulted in demonstrable impacts to youth, families, and the juvenile justice system.

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### The Issue

From 1985 to 2009, the number of youth placed on probation across the nation increased 29% and the delinquency probation caseload increased 30%.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this time period, there were several initiatives that focused on specific issues involving the juvenile probation population. These efforts targeted chronic violent offenders, Disproportionately-contacted minority youth, youth in detention, and substance abusers, among others. However, few established probation models comprehensively integrate best practices across these efforts.

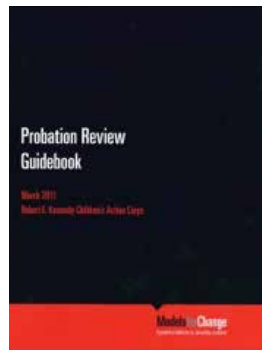
Louisiana, like many other states, has struggled to create a rational, just, responsive, and rehabilitative juvenile justice system. Following a 1998 U.S. Department of Justice lawsuit and settlement agreement concerning conditions of confinement in its juvenile facilities, Louisiana faced a large-scale shift from its emphasis

on institutional care to a demand for improved community-based supervision and services that placed an increasing demand on probation departments. This move was coupled with a renewed focus by the state to make improvements across the juvenile justice system. In 2007, Louisiana was chosen by the MacArthur Foundation to serve as a core state for the *Models for Change* (MfC) initiative. Six jurisdictions were included in the effort: Caddo Parish, Calcasieu Parish, Jefferson Parish, Rapides Parish, the 16th Judicial District Court (JDC), and the 4th JDC. The three targeted areas of improvement for this initiative (i.e. Alternatives to Formal Processing, Evidence-Based Practices, and Disproportionate Minority Contact) all coincided with steps needed for comprehensive juvenile probation reform and the development of models for effective probation practice. This Innovation Brief highlights several key improvements made in probation practices through this effort.

## Innovations

### Probation Review Process:

As a key component in the reform work, Jefferson Parish juvenile probation leaders engaged in a probation review performed by MFC national consultants from the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps. The probation review consisted of a comprehensive system assessment, development of a tailored work plan, and implementation of work plan activities using a variety of methodologies (e.g., employee surveys, stakeholder interviews, focus groups, leadership team meetings, etc.). The process of the probation review is captured in the *Models for Change Probation Review Guidebook* and its companion guide *Probation Review Implementation: How Best Practices Meet Everyday Practices*.



**Screening & Assessment:** Louisiana state and local probation departments implemented a range of objective, valid, and reliable screening and assessment tools that serve as cornerstones to inform juvenile justice programming decisions. The Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY), Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument-2 (MAYSI-2), and Juvenile Inventory for Functioning (JIFF) were among the instruments implemented. The *Jefferson Parish Department of Juvenile Services Screening & Assessment Manual* is one example detailing the use of screening and assessment tools by a probation department. In addition, a model for pre-dispositional psychological reports was developed by a collaborative effort between Caddo Parish Juvenile Services and the National Youth Screening & Assessment Project to standardize pre-disposition reports. See links to these resources at the end of this document.

**Graduated Response Grids:** Behavioral modification principles have shown that the adoption of new behavior tends to be expedited when systems focus on rewards and not just punishment. Following this principle, Jefferson Parish, Calcasieu Parish, and the 4th Judicial District Court developed graduated-response grids that integrate best practices with current research. These tools were developed through a collaborative effort with probation

officers, reform leaders, and juvenile courts to implement a method of changing behaviors rather than merely issuing consequences. Additional resources are listed in the Resources section of this brief.

### Administrative and Managerial Tools of Probation Practice— *Emphasizing engagement, service matching, and data collection:*

Installing innovative practices alone is insufficient for effective practices to have significant impact on outcomes. Use of an organized, supervised, and coordinated administrative process contributes to successful probation management and program implementation. Many probation offices have adopted better engagement principles related to how they work with youth and families. Few, however, have invested in the supervision of those practices beyond initial training. In Louisiana, almost every jurisdiction and the state probation office implemented the use of Motivational Interviewing (MI)<sup>2</sup> for probation departments. To integrate supervision of this approach, Rapides Parish developed a MI Master Trainer checklist to increase fidelity and several departments, like that in Jefferson Parish, trained and supported officers to perform ongoing training of staff on use of MI. Once engaged, screened or assessed, it is critical to match youth with services that can address their identified risk and needs. To this end, each Louisiana MFC site developed service matrices to connect identified needs and risk to available interventions, emphasizing evidence based practices whenever available. These service matrices were locally-developed, but followed similar models indicating overall risk and identified-need areas, which standardized interventions and enhanced the development of service plans. Last, to ensure that all these approaches were linked to the ultimate objective of improving system and youth outcomes, another innovation was the enhancement of data collection. Using existing software, both state and local probation offices (e.g. Office of Juvenile Justice, Calcasieu Division of Youth Services, and Jefferson Department of Juvenile Services) enhanced their capacity to collect probation outcome and output data.

## Results

One of the most visible results of these innovations is the ability to collect, analyze, and disseminate data regarding the impact of reform activities. Below are a few results

collected that reflect the impact that reform activities have made on juvenile probation.

**Increased Use of Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs):**

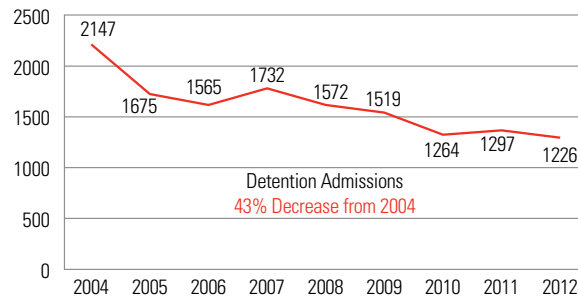
More than following national trends toward implementing EBPs, Louisiana has embraced the notion that unproven treatment can do more harm than good and waste scarce funding. This has included closing many untested boot-camps and scared straight programs, while simultaneously prioritizing EBPs and ensuring their utilization. With this focus and its juvenile justice reform efforts, Louisiana evolved from one of the lowest ranked states in the adoption of key EBPs, to being ranked second in the nation per capita for its implementation of key juvenile justice related EBPs. This success is evidenced in declining arrest rates, suggesting public safety was maintained and possibly even improved.<sup>3</sup> In one local area (Jefferson Parish), where EBP contracting and utilization was closely monitored, the amount of probationers referred to EBPs increased from 7% in 2007 to 99% in 2012.

**Lower Recidivism:** Recidivism falls short of being a comprehensive measure of effective probation programming; however, it is a key measure of the community’s expectations of probation activities. In addition to data on other key outcome measures, recidivism has declined following probation reform activities. For example, Jefferson Parish data showed that one-year recidivism for youth completing probation in 2009 to be 53%. Following probation reform activities in 2012, recidivism fell to 20%. Similar data continues to be collected and utilized as a yardstick for measuring the impact of probation activities on community safety.

**Decreased Detention Numbers:** Detention utilization has received national attention due to projects like the Casey Foundation’s Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, which provides an objective look at both arrest and probation outcomes. Along with the MacArthur Foundation’s focus on alternative processing, evidence-based practice, disproportionate minority contact, and development of tools like Graduated Response Grids, described above, jurisdictions have experienced declines in detention admissions. From 2006 to 2009, Caddo Parish experienced a 47% decline in detention admissions by focusing on alternative programming for youth taken into

custody for minor school offenses. Calcasieu Parish showed a 17% decline in annual detention admissions from 2011 to 2012, and Jefferson Parish showed a 43% decline in detention admissions from 2004 to 2012 (see figure 1).

**Figure 1: Jefferson Parish Detention Admissions**



**Lower Probation Caseloads:** Probation reform activities in targeted *Models for Changes* sites like Calcasieu and Jefferson Parishes have resulted in a 37% to 43% reduction in probation caseloads. Fewer youth on probation has contributed to an average of 20 youth per probation officer. These more manageable caseloads translate to improved probation practices such as increased supervision quality, greater knowledge of youth’s progress and needs, and the ability to spend more time with youth and families in the office, during home visits, and at schools. Further, this enhanced probation officer capacity has generated greater confidence from juvenile court judges, making court interactions less adversarial and more collaborative.

**The Broader Impact**

Changing established processes is certainly a formidable challenge for any probation department. However, results achieved through the Louisiana probation reform efforts show that even deeply engrained practices can be modified through comprehensive probation reform.

For those who are reluctant to embark on the journey of reforming juvenile probation, it is important to consider several salient points. First, the commonly-used adage, “You don’t need to reinvent the wheel” holds true. Probation reform processes have been developed, tested, and documented. Several of these documents are listed below in the Resources section. Second, Louisiana probation reform activities provide guidelines for best practices surrounding operation of juvenile probation

departments beyond typical adult probation correctional models. For example, the better understanding of adolescent development as well as delinquency has led to a significant increase in programming that can be made available to probation officers to reduce risk while enhancing protective factors in order to reduce youths' likelihood of engaging in behaviors that bring them in contact with the justice system. Lastly, effective probation reform on a local or state level requires jurisdictions to work through their differences and focus on improving the lives of youth who are under supervision. Lessons learned from applying probation reform activities in Louisiana show the work can be done both efficiently and effectively when there is commitment, leadership, vision, organization and resources dedicated to the efforts.

## Resources

Center for Children's Law and Policy. (2012). *Developing a System of Graduated Responses for Youth Supervised by the Juvenile Justice System*: <http://www.goccp.maryland.gov/events/materials/dmc/Developing-a-System-of-Graduated-Responses-How-To-Guide.pdf>

*Graduated Response Grid Resource*: <http://www.reclaimingfutures.org/blog/juvenile-drug-courts-graduated-responses-NCJFCJ-Reclaiming-Futures>

Hill, P. H., Goodwin, L. & Grisso, T. (2009). *A Template for Written Reports of Pre-Dispositional Psychological Reports*.

Located at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's website at: [http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/452/A\\_Template\\_for\\_Written\\_Reports\\_of\\_PreDisposition\\_Psychological\\_Evaluations.pdf](http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/452/A_Template_for_Written_Reports_of_PreDisposition_Psychological_Evaluations.pdf)

Institute of Public Health and Justice. (2011). *Jefferson Parish Department of Juvenile Services Screening and Assessment Manual*. Located at the Institute of Public Health and Justice website: [http://sph.lsuhs.edu/Websites/Isupublichealth/images/pdf/iphj/4A\\_JeffersonSAManual.pdf](http://sph.lsuhs.edu/Websites/Isupublichealth/images/pdf/iphj/4A_JeffersonSAManual.pdf)

Phillippi, S., DePrato, D. & Vincent, G. (2011). *Service Matrix: Linking Results of Screening & Assessment with Appropriate Services*. Published by the Institute for Public Health and Justice. New Orleans, LA. Available at <http://sph.lsuhs.edu/Websites/Isupublichealth/images/pdf/iphj/BRIEF%20Service%20Matrices%20PHILLIPPI%204%202011%20with%20VINCENT%20Eds.pdf>

Ryals, J. S. (2013). *Probation Review Implementation: How Best Practices Meet Everyday Practices*. Located at the Robert F. Kennedy National Resource Center for Juvenile Justice website: <http://www.rfknrcj.org/images/PDFs/Probation-Review-Implementation.pdf>

Vincent, G. M., Guy, L. S., & Grisso, T. (2012). *Risk Assessment in Juvenile Justice: A Guidebook for Implementation*. National Youth Screening & Assessment Project. Located at the *Models for Change* website: <http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/346>

Wiig, J. K., & Tuell, J. A. (2011). *Probation Review Guidebook*. Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps. Located at John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's *Models for Change* website: <http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/326>

1. Livsey, S. (2012). Juvenile Delinquency Probation Caseload, 2009. OJJDP National Report Series (NCJ 239082).
2. Motivational Interviewing is a collaborative, goal-oriented method of communication with particular attention to the language of change. It is designed to strengthen an individual's motivation for and movement toward a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person's own arguments for change.
3. Greenwood, P. W., Welsh, B. C., & Roque, M. (2012). *Implementing Proven Programs for Juvenile Offenders: Assessing State Progress*. Located at the Advancing Evidence Based Practices website at: [http://www.advancingebp.org/?page\\_id=18](http://www.advancingebp.org/?page_id=18)

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For more information, contact the Institute for Public Health and Justice <http://sph.lsuhs.edu/iphj>

This brief is one in a series describing new knowledge and innovations emerging from *Models for Change*, a multi-state juvenile justice reform initiative. *Models for Change* is accelerating movement toward a more effective, fair, and developmentally sound juvenile justice system by creating replicable models that protect community safety, use resources wisely, and improve outcomes for youths. The briefs are intended to inform professionals in juvenile justice and related fields, and to contribute to a new national wave of juvenile justice reform.