



NOTES FROM THE FIELD

A product of the Status Offense Reform Center (SORC), Notes from the Field is a series profiling jurisdictions that have undertaken status offense system change.

What is a status offense?

Status offenses are behaviors that are prohibited under law only because of an individual's status as a minor, including running away from home, skipping school, violating a curfew, drinking under age, and acting "incorrigibly." They are problematic, but noncriminal in nature.

What is SORC?

SORC provides policymakers and practitioners with tools and information to create effective, community-based responses for keeping young people who engage in noncriminal behavior out of the juvenile justice system. The Center is a project of the Vera Institute of Justice and is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's *Models for Change* Resource Center Partnership.

Newton County, GA

POPULATION ESTIMATE: 103,700

YOUTH POPULATION ESTIMATE: 28,000

MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Suburban/Rural

The Call to Action

Newton County, Georgia's Juvenile Court first began to reform its approach to truancy cases when it became a Truancy Intervention Project (TIP) court in 2001. Developed by the Fulton County Juvenile Court in conjunction with the Atlanta Bar Foundation, TIP courts are diversion courts in which volunteer attorneys represent the youth in the courtroom, serving as both advocates and mentors. The various TIP court actors—the judge, intake officers, probation officers, attorneys, etc.—work together to address issues faced by the youth in question. While Newton County Judge Sheri C. Roberts and Associate Judge Lisa Mantz saw the TIP court's potential for positive change, recruiting a sufficient number of volunteer attorneys was a recurring challenge. With a clear desire to keep more youth out of courtrooms altogether, they wondered, "Why are we utilizing a court model to address truancy if we are trying to decriminalize the offense?"

The Change Process

These practical and philosophical considerations led Judge Roberts to initiate a court review project in 2010. With the support of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the National Training and Technical Assistance Center (NTTAC), Newton County received technical assistance to construct a long-term plan for comprehensive system improvement. This plan focused on effective and efficient court operations, improved data collection, streamlined intervention strategies for school-based delinquency referrals, and the implementation of enhanced interagency approaches for dual status youth—or youth that are involved in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems—that support quality case planning and management. Then, in 2013, Newton County was selected to join a four-site demonstration project, supported in partnership by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and OJJDP to address dual status youth.

The OJJDP court review and the dual status technical assistance provided the comprehensive understanding and data needed for Newton County to reevaluate its truancy system. As Newton County grappled with the extensive data compiled on dually-involved youth, the court saw a

need to prioritize its status offense work. A close examination of the data revealed dockets dominated by status offense cases, with truancy comprising 80 percent of those cases. Experience had taught Newton County the importance of addressing truancy problems early on, since truancy is often both a symptom of and risk factor for more serious problems. Concurrent with Newton County's data analysis, the Georgia state legislature passed House Bill 242 that created the Children in Need of Services (CHINS) designation and replaces court intervention with an interagency approach to family-centered service planning and delivery.

Equipped with extensive data, reforms on the state level triggered by HB 242, and assistance from the Robert F. Kennedy Juvenile Justice Collaborative, Newton County looked for truancy intervention models in other states that could be effectively implemented in Newton County. After studying various best practice models, Newton County created the Truancy Intervention Board, inspired by the Community Truancy Board established in Spokane County, Washington. When schools file complaints against youth for truancy or educational neglect, the majority of those complaints are now referred to the Truancy Intervention Board. The Board, which began its pilot in fall 2014, consists of a variety of community stakeholders, including representatives from the Department of Education, the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS), community-based programs, and any other natural supports for the family.

The Model

The Truancy Intervention Board aims to divert youth away from the formal court process by addressing problems of truancy and educational neglect outside the courtroom, with the support of invested community stakeholders. After a school files a complaint for truancy or educational neglect, the intake officer who receives the complaint decides whether or not to formally file the petition with the courts. The intake officer first asks the child and family to participate in a structured interview to assess their needs and explains the requirements of the Truancy Intervention Program. If the youth needs more immediate services in addition to a meeting with the Truancy Intervention Board, such as family counseling or substance abuse treatment, the intake officer makes those referrals simultaneously. This reflects Newton County's commitment to diversion and screening from the moment a complaint is made.

If the intake officer decides not to file a petition with the court, a referral is made for a Truancy Intervention Board meeting. At the meeting, the Truancy Intervention Board works with the child and family to develop a case plan tailored to their individual needs. Recommendations vary from

case to case; some youth need alarm clocks, others require referrals to parenting or behavioral health services, and some, those struggling with special education needs, would be best served by increased accommodations in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

The Board also has the ability to refer youth to gender-specific diversion programming supported by the court. Specifically, the Board can refer eligible female youth to the Girl STEPS program and eligible male youth to MAPP (Male Adolescent Prevention Program). The Girl STEPS program was developed to service girls who present with low-level offenses (including truancy) and high levels of need with respect to self-harm, running away, and additional family issues. Based on the research-based Girls Moving On program, it includes group counseling, mentoring, family sessions, parenting trainings for mothers, and community service projects. MAPP—a boys-only diversion program that blends evidenced-based life skills instruction with the evidence based Strengthening Families Program to prevent deeper juvenile justice system involvement—was launched by the court following the success of the STEPS program.

Once the Truancy Intervention Board develops a case plan, youth have 90 days to complete services under the supervision of an intake officer, and are then referred back to the Board for additional meetings as needed. The faces present at Truancy Intervention Board Meetings stay consistent, providing critical stability for youth who may be struggling. Upon completion of the program requirements, the intake officer requests the case to be dismissed and the record sealed.

Monitoring Progress and Ensuring Success

When a young person enters the program, a general universal release is executed that covers all involved parties in the case, allowing agencies to share information and develop a comprehensive plan to address the family's needs. Sometimes, case managers continue to counsel and monitor the youth after dismissal, and most cases are left open for 90 days to allow for follow-up meetings and check-ins. The first meeting occurs with the Truancy Intervention Board, and follow-ups are typically scheduled with only the intake officer. If problems arise after the first board meeting, a subsequent meeting may be scheduled with the full group.

The lead intake officer assigned collects all demographic, filing and disposition information and compiles it in a CHINS excel spreadsheet. This information is reviewed under the direction of the Court Administrator to track outcomes and measure the efficacy of the program.

Outcomes

The Truancy Intervention Board is demonstrating promising outcomes for youth struggling with truancy. For example, of the 36 Newton County youth that were referred to the Board during the 2014-2015 academic year, only two received new delinquent charges, and four received formally filed petitions. Local implementation of HB 242, which took away prosecutorial authority from the district attorney's office and mandated additional interventions in the community before a complaint can be filed, has also contributed to an overall drop in the number of status offense cases petitioned to Newton County's juvenile court. The number of "unruly" cases petitioned to court since 2014, for example, dropped from 225 to 140, a 38 percent decrease.

Reflections

Be prepared to face and work through uncertainty. Going forward, Newton County plans to continue adapting and improving as new challenges appear. One of Newton County's biggest concerns is what to do with children when their service plans fail and all existing diversionary options have been exhausted. The institutional response to these types of cases has not yet been solidified, but the Board intends to keep working closely with the families and, in so doing, will hopefully devise new ways to support such children.

To achieve change, stakeholders must work together and take action. While tricky details inevitably arise and adjustments must be made along the way, Newton County believes firmly in the importance of strategically diving into a project headfirst. Fear of failure too often prevents effective plans from ever getting off the ground. The Newton County example also highlights the importance of being receptive to new ideas and models, and working collaboratively across agencies and programs. According to Judge Mantz, working with the Truancy Intervention Board has helped her see that tackling truancy requires a comprehensive plan which includes a variety of stakeholders that may be involved in a young person's life. Challenges do arise, but Judge Mantz urges all involved to remember that they are working towards the same goal and desire the best for young people and their families.

Related Resources

- Truancy Intervention Project: <http://www.truancyproject.org/>