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# Assessment of Courtroom Presentation Training

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SC Department of Juvenile Justice  
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**South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice  
Community Service Division**

**Assessment of Courtroom Presentation Training**

**Background**

The South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), a state cabinet agency, is responsible for providing rehabilitation and custodial care for the state's juveniles who are on probation, incarcerated, or on parole for a criminal or status offense. Its mission supports the Governor's mission by protecting the public and reclaiming juveniles through prevention, community programs, education, and rehabilitative services in the least restrictive environment. DJJ is organized within four divisions and two support offices. There are approximately 1500 full time employee positions within DJJ.

The section within DJJ that provides the majority of DJJ's training is Staff Development and Training (SDT), which falls, organizationally, under the Administrative Services Division. SDT is responsible for providing new employee orientation, basic training for newly hired staff and on going in-service training for all of DJJ's employees.

Community Services Basic Training for our county office staff is a required 80-hour course that is offered three times a year and averages an attendance of 12 community specialists (intake, probation, and parole case managers). In providing this basic training, SDT relies on practitioners to provide various blocks of instruction. Courtroom Presentation is a six-hour block of instruction within this basic training that is currently taught by DJJ's General Counsel and one of the Community Division's Senior Managers.

The last time this block of instruction was evaluated was approximately 12 years ago. In an effort to maintain the integrity of the Courtroom Presentation Training, the trainers decided that a reassessment of this lesson plan was necessary. Therefore, this

research project was designed to reassess the current Courtroom Presentation lesson plan to determine if, and where, revisions are needed.

Approximately 7 years ago, several USC journalism students surveyed a select group of DJJ community staff regarding the Courtroom Presentation training. The goal of this particular project was to ascertain the level of conformity of DJJ intake officers to standards set in the department's courtroom presentation training class. The results of this effort focused more on lapse time of training and its impact on performance in courtroom rather than curriculum content and its impact on effective courtroom presentation.

### **Problem Statement**

Currently, the trainers of the Courtroom Presentation Training are presenting a block of instruction to newly hired community specialists that was last updated 12 years ago.

The SC Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) is statutorily mandated (Section 20-7-7405 of the SC Children's Code)...to offer appropriate dispositional recommendations to the family court for its consideration and determination of the disposition of the case for juveniles adjudicated delinquent or found to be in violation of the terms of probation. During the last twelve years, there have been legislative, agency policy, and administrative/philosophy changes which have impacted DJJ and possibly its role in the courtroom. It is critical that DJJ's county staff, who are providing recommendations in the courtroom, are well-trained in updated courtroom proceedings, courtroom etiquette and case preparation and presentation. The average amount of time to provide a dispositional recommendation is 2-5 minutes and has the potential to greatly impact the court's decision regarding a juvenile's sentence. Therefore, community staff's recommendations need to be well thought out, articulated concisely, appropriate to the offense and other factors, in line with the agency's mission, and in the best interest of that juvenile, the community and the victim. Having staff properly trained in making courtroom presentations is essential in building credibility in the courtroom with the Family Court Judges and in providing the most appropriate services for juvenile offenders.

## **Methodology**

The trainers of Courtroom Presentation decided that a survey of the 55 current SC Family Court Judges would be an effective way to assess the accuracy and currency of this training and its impact on DJJ staff's courtroom behavior and presentation. The Judges were the only ones surveyed since the courtroom is their domain and the target audience in receiving DJJ's recommendations.

A five statement Likert Scale Survey was developed (Appendix 1) by the two trainers based on the current Courtroom Presentation lesson plan with a section on the survey for additional comments. This draft survey was reviewed by various DJJ staff and practitioners for comments prior to finalizing the survey. The review resulted in developing examples to further define survey questions. For example: Question 1 was a statement about staff being appropriately dressed. Some examples included, well groomed, neat/clean and professional looking attire to further define 'appropriately dressed'. No other revisions were recommended by the review team.

The survey was then mailed via US mail to the Family Court Judges along with a letter of introduction and purpose of the survey from Judge Byars, Director of DJJ (Appendix 2). The survey was mailed on December 1, 2005 with a requested return date of December 31, 2005. A total of 25 completed surveys were returned by the deadline date.

## **Data Results & Analysis**

On December 31, 2005, 25 of the 55 surveys (45%) were returned completed. DJJ's Office of Policy and Planning analyzed the gathered data. The responses are indicated on the next page.

Survey of South Carolina Family Court Judges  
Results

1. When DJJ staff are in court, they are appropriately dressed.

Response	Percent
Strongly Agree	56%
Agree	36%
Unsure	8%

2. DJJ staff conduct themselves professionally in court.

Response	Percent
Strongly Agree	76%
Agree	24%

3. DJJ staff presentations in court are generally clear and concise; information is presented is relevant and helpful to the court.

Response	Percent
Strongly Agree	52%
Agree	48%

4. DJJ staff are generally well prepared when presenting recommendations in court.

Response	Percent
Strongly Agree	52%
Agree	40%
Unsure	4%
Disagree	4%

5. DJJ staff are generally knowledgeable about services/placements available when responding to questions asked of them by court and court officials.

Response	Percent
Strongly Agree	48%
Agree	40%
Unsure	8%
Disagree	4%

Additional Comments with corresponding questions:

**1. Appropriately Dressed:**

Men should wear coats and ties;

Frankly, many female DJJ intake officers are dressed in a manner that would be distracting to male teen clients.

**2. Professional Conduct:**

Usually if the caseworker wishes to make a comment they stand until recognized to speak.

**3. Effective Presentations:**

When an alternative placement is recommended, be specific on which placement and is that placement available;

Staff should be constantly reminded – “Speak slowly, take your time, you are not in a race!”;

Availability of services in the local area is sometimes an area of confusion;

Make sure they know, upon questioning by the court, the date of evaluation, prior adjudications and have school records.

**4. Well Prepared:**

I have the “pre-disposition” report in my hand;

Many times, I do not get updated school records showing attendance and behavior problems;

Most of the times;

Know what is available and when it is available;

Put all recommendations in writing for court file.

**5. Knowledgeable:**

Resources are somewhat limited in rural counties. This certainly is not the fault of DJJ staff;

Don't get information about availability of alternative placement prior to hearing – we have to recess so they can call Columbia.

Creates unnecessary delays. I find that there is no “individualized” treatment plan/probation terms seems to be too generalized. Not enough thought into family dynamics;

Work to not make recommendations for services unavailable in this area. Make sure DJJ staff members understand what the court can and cannot do under our statute (i.e. detaining status offenders seems to be a confusing area).

**Miscellaneous comments:**

DJJ staff should have up to date school records (inc. recent grades) whenever possible;

Generally do an excellent job;

I have had nothing but pleasant experiences with DJJ staff throughout the state and I have held court in 26 different counties;

Generally, I give DJJ workers in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Circuit very high grades – very cooperative and work hard;

I have been very impressed with all DJJ workers I've seen. Very professional!

Very impressed with DJJ in all counties where I have had court:

Sumter, Lee, Clarendon, Williamsburg, Darlington, Richland, Kershaw, Lexington – very impressed – all are very helpful;

Second Circuit DJJ offices and staff appear to be well informed and professionally run. I am very pleased;

The DJJ in 14<sup>th</sup> circuit go above and beyond the call of duty in my opinion;

Thanks for all the hard work!

The DJJ staff in the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit are always knowledgeable and well prepared. They do an excellent job.

I absolutely enjoy our DJJ staff in Richland County and appreciate their courteous, efficient handling of court cases.

Thanks to all of you!

Overall the responses to the survey indicate that DJJ staff are doing a very good job in their court presentations. In 86% or more of the responses, the questions were answered affirmatively: “agree” or “strongly agree”. The responses “unsure” or “disagree” were marked in only three of the five questions (questions 1, 4, and 5), and then only one to three judges answered in that manner.

The tendency to mark each response in the same category occurs with Lickert Scales in which the response is always in the same order. That tendency was demonstrated in that 16, (64%), of the respondents marked the same response category for all five questions.

There was concurrence between the "suggested improvements/comments" which were completed and the scoring of the questions. In other words, if the response was a positive "strongly agree" or "agree", the comments were also positive; when the response was "unsure" or "disagree" the comments reflected a shortcoming on the part of DJJ staff.

Although the majority of comments were positive, there were two areas where more than one respondent suggested improvements.

1. When recommending services or alternative placement, staff should ensure it is a viable recommendation:
  - staff has researched the recommendation and it is or is not available;
  - the recommended services/placement are available in the area;
  - the service or placement has a vacancy or slot for referral.
  
2. Up to date school information is included in forming the recommendations and/or responding to the court's interests and available for the courts review:
  - School attendance/absence records;
  - School progress (grades);
  - Behavioral reports;
  - Psychoeducational reports, where available.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Based on the results analyses, the following recommendations are being made:

- 1) The trainers of the Courtroom Presentations Curriculum are to emphasize to the training participants the need to comply with the areas that were highlighted in the Judges' comments section of the survey:
  - Provide a written report of the disposition recommendation;
  - Men should wear coats and ties;
  - Women should dress conservatively;
  - Provide up to date school records (including attendance, behavior; and any psychoeducational reports);

- Offer placement as an alternative only if a placement is available, or a viable plan until placement is available;
- Speak slowly and clearly;
- Ensure recommendation meets the intent of the law;
- Provide information regarding prior adjudications.

2) The Survey Analysis and Recommendations are to be shared with the Regional Administrators (R.A.) who supervise the county offices. This information can be shared with the judges as a follow up when the R.A.'s meet with them. The R.A.'s can also monitor staff in the courtroom and their compliance to the training standards. These conclusions and recommendations should also be shared with each county director within their region so they can provide effective 'on the job training' and monitor for compliance in the courtroom.

3) The curriculum trainers are to follow up with the judges who identified themselves and made specific recommendations for improvement. This will allow for further clarification of the Judge's comments and to let the Judge know that follow up is taking place.

In conclusion, the county office staff do a good job in providing and presenting courtroom information. It is believed that the current training curriculum is basically meeting the needs of our staff and the courts. However, the areas identified in the survey will be added/highlighted in the training curriculum to strengthen the training and in an effort to enhance the Courtroom Presentation Training.

## **References**

DJJ's Web Site – [www.state.sc.us/djj](http://www.state.sc.us/djj): DJJ/Community Services  
Division Mission Statements

SC Children's Code:Section 20-7-7405

Media Mass Communications Journalism Project – 1999 Survey of  
DJJ Intake Officers

DJJ Office of Policy and Procedure – Survey data analysis

# Appendices

# Appendix 1

**SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE**  
**Division of Community Services**  
**Survey of South Carolina Family Court Judges**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (optional)

*INSTRUCTIONS: Please rate each statement by placing an X mark in the most appropriate response column. 1– **strongly agree**; 2–**agree**; 3– **unsure**; 4– **disagree**; 5 – **strongly disagree**  
Please return to Lesa Timmerman, SCDJJ, P.O. Box 21069, Columbia, S.C. 29221-1069.*

1. When DJJ staff are in court, they are appropriately dressed (i.e. well groomed, neat/clean and professional looking attire):

1 strongly agree	2 agree	3 unsure	4 disagree	5 strongly disagree

Suggested improvements/comments – Specific observations/examples:

\_\_\_\_\_

2. DJJ staff conduct themselves professionally when in court (i.e., do not disrupt or interrupt proceedings, display cooperative spirit with all court officials):

1 strongly agree	2 agree	3 unsure	4 disagree	5 strongly disagree

Suggested improvements/comments:

\_\_\_\_\_

3. DJJ staff presentations in court are generally clear and concise; information presented is relevant and helpful to the court:

1 strongly agree	2 agree	3 unsure	4 disagree	5 strongly disagree

Suggested improvements/comments:

\_\_\_\_\_

4. DJJ staff are generally well prepared when presenting recommendations in court, (i.e. recommendations are organized, defensible, and appropriate; advance work to make recommendation “happen” if ordered by the court has been undertaken):

1 strongly agree	2 agree	3 unsure	4 disagree	5 strongly disagree

Suggested improvements/comments:

\_\_\_\_\_

5. DJJ staff are generally knowledgeable about services/placements available when responding to questions asked of them by the court and court officials:

1 strongly agree	2 agree	3 unsure	4 disagree	5 strongly disagree

Suggested improvements/comments:

\_\_\_\_\_

Other Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank You!!

***Please submit by December 31, 2005.***

## **Appendix 2**



**South Carolina  
Department of  
Juvenile Justice**

Bill Byars, Director

P.O. Box 21069  
Columbia, SC 29221-1069  
[www.state.sc.us/djj](http://www.state.sc.us/djj)



Mark Sanford  
Governor  
State of South Carolina

December 1, 2005

The Honorable William Jeffrey Young  
3<sup>rd</sup> Judicial Circuit Family Court  
PO Box 1816  
Sumter, SC 29151-1816

Dear Judge Young:

In the months and years to come, one of my goals is to focus upon, and hopefully enhance, the quality and quantity of training provided to all DJJ employees. Currently, all "new" field counselors (intake workers and probation counselors) hired by the Department are required to go through 80 hours (2 weeks) of "basic" training. Included in this training is a 6-hour training on how to make effective Courtroom Presentations. During this training, DJJ staff are taught that the presentations they make in court is a form of public speaking, they are encouraged and trained as to how they can obtain and maintain credibility with their audience (the Court) and on how they can enhance their presentations in court through their appearance, demeanor, their presentation (what they say and how they say it) and through their preparation (what they do in advance of court in support of their recommendations).

The curriculum for this training, while excellent, has remained basically unchanged for 15+ years. Your feedback on how this training can be made more current and relevant and on how information conveyed to you in court can be done more effectively would be greatly appreciated. Your observations, suggestions, and "real life" examples, etc., both good and bad of things you have heard or seen DJJ staff do or say in court, would help us to enhance this course's relevance to our staff and in turn their effectiveness to you.

With kindest personal regards, I am

Sincerely,

William R. Byars, Jr.  
Director

WRBj/db

William R. Byars, Jr., Director (803) 896-5940  
Sarah Jane Odiome, Administrative Assistant (803) 896-5940  
Facsimile: (803) 896-6932