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Re-Imagining Re-Entry: A Journey “HOME” from Juvenile Justice

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Overview of South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice

The South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) is a state cabinet agency committed to serving South Carolina's youthful offenders. DJJ is responsible for providing custodial care and rehabilitation for youth who are incarcerated, as well as on probation or parole in community placement. DJJ provides an array of prevention and intervention programs for justice-involved youth at five secured hardware facilities, 43 county offices, and ten camps across the state of South Carolina (SCDJJ, 2023).

DJJ's new Executive Director Eden Hendrick, was officially confirmed in May 2022 by Governor Henry McMaster. The change in leadership provided an opportunity to reevaluate the agency, its operations, and commitments while creating a new organizational structure.¹ Consequently, the new focus and rebrand of DJJ's new mission is "to impact and transform young lives, strengthen families, and support safer communities through targeted prevention and rehabilitation." In like manner, its vision is "that youth discover their strengths and abilities and become productive and successful citizens contributing to a safer South Carolina" (SCDJJ, 2023).

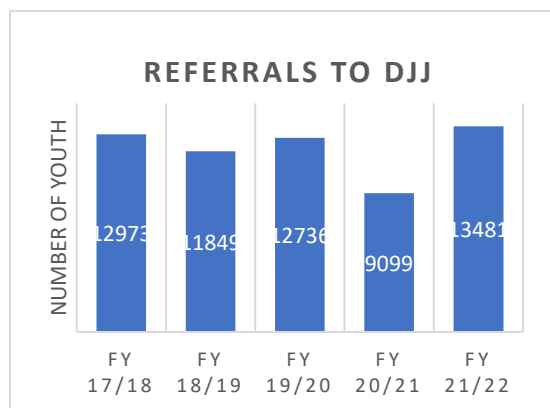
Problem Statement

It is the hope of DJJ to see youth become productive citizens while contributing to a safer South Carolina. Youth at DJJ can participate in their rehabilitation and restorative journey. Although, youth have been released from DJJ, there has been an increase of referrals to the Agency in addition to the increase rates of recidivism. There is a gap between the rehabilitation provided and the ways in which they return to the juvenile justice system from the community.

¹ See DJJ Agency Organizational Chart in Appendix

Youth are referred to DJJ for several reasons. While those reasons are too numerous to mention and do not serve the purposes of this project, it is important to get an overview of how many youths have been referred to DJJ so we are able to see the disruption that occurs within the community.

Figure 1



It's important to observe the referrals of FY 2019-2020 as it reflects an unusual drop in cases due to the COVID pandemic and its effects on juvenile justice system. In addition to the effects of COVID pandemic, there was a significant change that took place impacting the Agency. A recent passage of Senate Bill 916, Act268A (Raise the Age Bill) increase the number of youths who would be part of the system. Effective July 1, 2019, several statutes in the South Carolina Juvenile Justice Code were changed to "Raise the Age" and include most 17-year-olds in the juvenile justice system. As evidenced by the graph, we are seeing increases in referrals for all 17- year-olds in the state, in addition to those under 17 (SCDJJ Resource Guide, 2021).

DJJ experienced a significant increase in referrals in FY 22 (Figure 1). The full impact of the raise the age legislation came into full affect in addition to understanding capacity post COVID. Students were in school for the entire academic school year for the first time since raise the age legislation was effective on July 1, 2019. There was a 48.2% increase in referrals

over FY 21 and a 13.8% increase over FY 20 (SCDJJ, 2019). The increase of referrals paints part of a picture of the community's needs and the gaps that could be fulfilled.

Recidivism rates increased and youth committed to DJJ during the pandemic. SCDJJ defines its Annual Recidivism Rate as: Youth who are adjudicated for a new offense within one year of completing Arbitration, Probation, or Commitment. This rate includes only those youths who were subsequently adjudicated (convicted) in the juvenile justice system. It does not include those who were subsequently convicted in the adult system (SCDJJ, 2021).

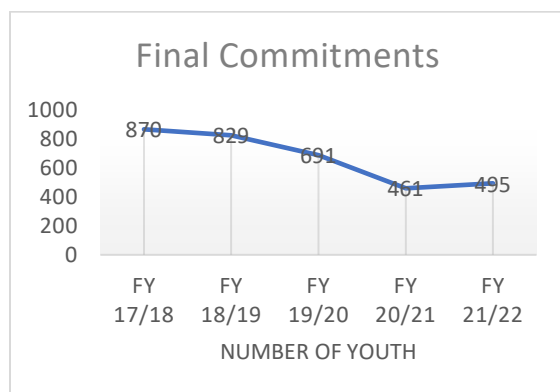
The last set of data that was engaged was that of recidivism rates particularly pertaining to commitments. This information is significant as it shows us the cyclical journey that youth travel from being system involved and into the community.

Figure 2



Data was also gathered to understand how many youth were committed to DJJ. DJJ supports juvenile justice reform and community-based prevention services which are designed to reduce recidivism. Despite an increase in final commitments over the previous Fiscal Year, DJJ reported fewer than 500 commitments to DJJ over the entire Fiscal Year 21/22.

Figure 3



Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected to gain understanding and awareness of reentry programs represented throughout various states. Assistance from Development and Accountability Staff was received as the department reached out to all fifty states requesting information on their respective reintegration and reentry processes. Out of the 50 states, 32% responded which afforded the opportunity to review noteworthy reintegration processes and their overall perspective.

There are various reintegration and reentry processes and models from different states; however, I would like to highlight a few of them. The Intensive Aftercare Program (IAP) model focused on the identification, preparation, transition, and re-entry of ‘high-risk’ juvenile offenders from secure confinement back into the community in a gradual, highly structured, and closely monitored fashion. This model was one of the first to acknowledge that effective aftercare planning must begin from the moment a young person enters a correctional facility. Key to the transition process was the delivery of services by a network of community-based agencies that started to work with the institution’s youth and continue aftercare programs. The implementation of the IAP was strong in Colorado. The Intensive Aftercare Program has within it a component called “continuity of care.” One of the five components focuses on the continuity

of attachment. This refers to youth developing positive relationships with people in the community. This component is commonly fulfilled with mentorship programs in the community.

Further research expressed how six of Ohio's mentoring programs impacted the rate of participant recidivism. The research presented an interesting discovery. The findings shared that participating programs that most aligned with evidence-based practices experienced the largest reduction in the rate of recidivism, while programs that least aligned with evidence-based practices saw an increase in the rate of participant recidivism (National Mentoring Resource Center, 2023). Many other states see the value of having volunteers, specifically mentors to help reentry programs.

Additionally, a cursory review of evidence-based practices, programs and models was conducted and incorporated into this report. Nationally recognized websites and publications from field experts such as the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), Performance-based Standards Learning Institute, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Center of Juvenile and Criminal Justice were reviewed for purposes of comparison and to establish standards.

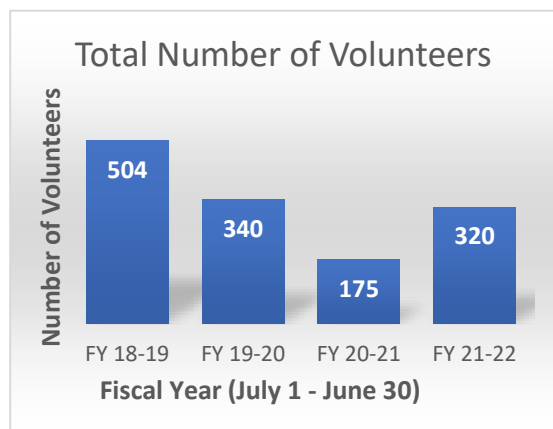
Another tool used to collect data was through Better Impact. Better Impact, a web-based communication tool allows the department of Volunteer Services within the Office of Community Engagement to connect with volunteers and donors while reporting key metrics from areas such as recruitment and onboarding, communications, hours and outcomes, and scheduling. In addition, this service allows for increase volunteer engagement through email, text messages and creating relevant orientations and trainings on specific areas of service. Better Impact gives Volunteer Services the option of grouping volunteers by various categories to include interests, skillset, geographical location, hours served, donations given, etc.

Volunteer capacity was identified of those who expressed interest in providing relevant services and programming. Volunteers were interested in bringing life skills classes, reentry programming, introducing service animals to help those who identify as trauma-informed, religious studies, micro-volunteering executing small and relevant projects, intramural sports activities promoting healthy competition and team-work, and gender responsive programs just to name a few. Volunteers help augment the workload by giving the Agency a more diverse talent base of skills to utilize.

Volunteers are proven to be an asset to the Agency. DJJ's volunteers participate in internships across all divisions, tutor, mentor, offer spiritual development and support through our Chaplaincy department, and lead transitional and life skills curricula that empower the youth mentally, physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually. Volunteers serve as a bridge and catalyst to help youth connect from corrections into the community. Engaging volunteers in service capacities allows for program infrastructure and development, additional donors, insights, not to mention, potential future employees.

Unfortunately, there was a decline of volunteers within the Agency during 2020-2021 as the COVID pandemic was ruthless in halting volunteer efforts and experiences isolating them from the good service they love and enjoy. Although, many volunteers expressed a desire to come and serve, their bodies no longer offered them that privilege of serving face-to-face. Conversely, there was a upswing in volunteers as recruitment efforts were underway and state restrictions were lifted. Orientations and mentor trainings were reviewed and updated to reflect the focus and expansion of the volunteer role and community outlook. Time passed; yet, volunteers' passion did not fade even though there were changes in restructuring and design.

Figure 3



Implementation Plan

A comprehensive reentry plan is needed to ensure that youth leaving out of placements are successfully transitioned to the community through asset capacity building and assistance of volunteer mentors and faith-based communities. DJJ is committed to improving long-term outcomes for system involved youth by strengthening families and supporting safer communities. This includes removing barriers that might undermine a youth's effort of returning to the community from secure confinement and other residential placements.

According to the Accountability Report 2022, to ensure continuity of programs and services amidst the leadership changes, Director Hendrick postponed modifying most of the agency's established goals and objections (SCDJJ, 2022). This action was favorable during this transitional and transformational time as it allowed the following goal to be continued: Enhance Services to Improve Long-term Outcomes for System-Involved Youth and Families. This goal is supported by a strategic plan that aims to keep youth in school, at work, and in the community.

In order to prepare system-involved youth, an innovative, evidence-based approach is needed in the development, implementation, and evaluation of an effective reentry strategy. Reentry programs that match youth with good case management services, mentor as well as

education and/or employment services have been associated with improved youth outcomes, including reduced recidivism rates. According to Youth.Gov, “To help youth develop the skills necessary for successful employment, juvenile justice facilities should offer high-quality vocational training and other employment supports including providing information about how to interview and behave appropriately in the workplace” (Reentry, 2023).

Not only is an effective and efficient process needed, but volunteers are able to add in incredible ways that increase the asset strength capacity producing a stronger and wider pool of interest and support. Volunteers would be able to connect to meaningful service while inspiring youth, instilling hope, and instructing them towards a successful future.

When implementing an opportunity to build connection and fill in the gaps, it’s important to ensure that volunteer mentors can also contribute in innovative ways that support these positive outcomes. Volunteers are a group of individuals who bring specific skills, talents, and experiences to a place that is ready for change and transformation. Volunteers support, promote, advocate, and enhance the work of staff who work on a daily basis with our system involved youth. Volunteer mentors provide social support, assist with problem solving, give encouragement, and provide experience of successfully living in a society necessary for the ex-offender to stabilize him or herself in the community. Mentoring is a widely-used prevention and intervention strategy for supporting youth who are involved in the criminal justice system (National Mentoring Resource Center, 2023).

A search of appropriate volunteers to provide touch points with youth through Volunteer Services department database will need to be conducted to establish a talent base of volunteers with specified interests of working with youth who are being prepared to go “HOME.”

Recruitment efforts will ensure this process by addressing the identified needs of the agency and matching through a volunteer recruitment strategy.

Volunteer Services and Community Engagement will review recruitment strategies and how to place volunteers to support the Agency's goals and initiatives. Once identified, volunteers will be placed in roles with meaningful assignments and given opportunity to engage further with youth and DJJ's mission across the Agency. This opportunity to enhance this process will allow divisions and offices to collaborate and work cross-divisionally ensuring better long-term positive outcomes. Volunteer orientations and mentor trainings were reviewed and updated to reflect focus and expansion of the volunteer role and community outlook. As orientations are held at least twice per month, volunteer opportunities should be updated that point volunteers towards helping youth re-imagine reentry.

Programs alone are not the solution. Moreover, it takes individuals who desire to give back and engage through community service by mentoring and walking with them along the journey of discovering this place called "HOME." There are potential obstacles that could impede on this progress of having volunteers connect with youth. Increased communication with volunteers, staff, community partners will allow others to see the benefits of volunteer engagement. Often times managers are already committed to meetings in their day and supervising a team and may not be open to welcoming a volunteer. Educating staff on the importance of this opportunity while sharing that this is a no-cost to them or the agency would increase collaboration and shared interest. Coordination and collaboration between departments are necessary to create cross-divisional services that supports the phases of reentry. It's vital for departments and divisions to see the above mentioned as opportunities instead of obstacles. This data analysis shows the gaps of need and concern.

A combination of efforts from Agency divisions working cross-divisionally and available community resources allows for the expression of strength, resiliency, and hope for those making their journey “HOME.” In every community there are networks of organizations that provide services. Service providers based in the neighborhoods have access to local resources to help youth rejoin the community in positive ways. Faith-based and community organizations are a tremendously valuable partner if government agencies can better engage them in prisoner reentry efforts (Reentry Partnerships, 2023).

Within communities of faith, individuals are not only able to worship and fellowship, they are able to build relationships between younger generations while transferring their knowledge base and insight. This becomes a kaleidoscope of experiences and intentions of improving positive outcomes for youth who have left the system and just need a little guidance from a caring adult offering support and motivation. Religious affiliation and participation is one of the key factors predicting volunteer engagement, both in sacred and secular organizations. Studies have also shown that the more religious people happen to be, the more likely they are to volunteer (Johnson, 2021). Moreover, the increase of religious activity is associated with increased service to others.

By enlisting faith-based communities combined with other volunteer mentors from the community, youth will have resources to assist with their journey “HOME.” Out of a concern for the welfare of others, religion can be seen as a catalyst that stimulates or generates volunteers. Whether through retreats, classes, small groups, camps, church-sponsored volunteer work, or a host of other related group functions, such events link people to networks of social support that are often quite meaningful (Johnson, 2021).

Evaluation Method

To determine the effectiveness of this strategy, Volunteer Services will generate reports through Better Impact database that capture the quantitative data needed. Operations would be centered on retrieving reports on the following: the total number of volunteers, number of faith-based organizations, how many volunteers were recruited in a quarterly period, and how many of those volunteers were mentors in facilities and in community settings. Surveys might be conducted of youth and their journey “HOME” experience. This survey would ask questions about the overall process of them being integrated into the community. As the mentors and faith-based organizations increase in community and are matched respectively with youth, reports of recidivism rates should be retrieved quarterly instead of annually as to better understand and analyze should recruitment efforts need to be increased. Finally, staff would be surveyed on their interaction with volunteers and possibly given further additional trainings to enhance the experience.

Summary and Recommendations

With the increase of referrals, increased rates of recidivism, and with notable increase of volunteer engagement, volunteers are able to assist youth in their journey “HOME” from juvenile justice. A comprehensive reentry plan is needed to ensure that youth leaving out of placements are successfully transitioned to the community through asset capacity building and assistance of volunteer mentors and faith-based communities. As DJJ is committed to improving long-term outcomes for system involved youth, volunteers are a missing ingredient when it comes to assisting strengthening families and supporting safer communities.

Some recommendations are to develop fact sheets related to agency reentry efforts for publication and distribution. Some of the states reviewed distributed detailed booklets and fliers describing the juvenile justice process and other pertinent information to youth and families. In 2015, the OJJDP launched the Juvenile Reentry Measurement Standards project and selected PbS to lead the initiative. Family was one of the four guiding principles, reentry planning one of its practices, and community connection and contribution one of the positive youth outcomes (Pbs, 2017).

Incorporating the Pbs Measurement Standard would further enhance this development. In addition, with increased information shared with stakeholders, engagement and excitement of volunteers and community partners can be leveraged to a greater degree. Although, volunteers are unpaid, their involvement is noteworthy as this brings resources and assistance in helping youth reimagine reentry because they now are surrounded by volunteers, faith-based organizations, and community partners who can walk with them along the journey “HOME” from juvenile justice.

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Appendix

