



Sustaining the Momentum of Probation System Reforms in Jefferson Parish

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As juvenile justice reform continues to spread across the United States, many probation departments are wary about investing scarce resources on reforms that may be short lived. Their reluctance is reasonable considering the plethora of programs in the past several decades that have been “innovative” and “effective,” but have little proof of long-term impacts.

However, the Probation System Review process led by the Robert F. Kennedy National Resource Center for Juvenile Justice has built on lessons of the past to enhance programs, practices, and policies to demonstrate long-term impacts on key goals of juvenile probation systems: reducing costs, protecting the community, and improving youth outcomes. This Knowledge Brief highlights the most recent results of ongoing tracking of the impact of reforms undertaken in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, and the key principles of sustainability that have contributed to the continued success of the Parish's reforms.

About the Robert F. Kennedy National Resource Center for Juvenile Justice

The Robert F. Kennedy National Resource Center for Juvenile Justice, led by Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps, provides consultation, technical assistance, and training to enhance the performance of youth-serving systems and improve outcomes for youth and families touched by the juvenile justice system. The services and resources delivered by the RFK National Resource Center address: (1) youth with prior or current involvement in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, known as dual status youth, (2) the review and improvement of juvenile probation systems, and (3) the use of a model framework to address the state and national laws and policies governing the exchange and sharing of data, information, and records for youth and families.

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Introduction

Jefferson Parish, a community directly adjacent to New Orleans, has a history of engaging in innovative programs. From implementing the Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders to initiating Louisiana's first arrest intake center nearly 20 years ago, this jurisdiction has a wealth of experience with implementing reforms. Therefore, when the Department of Juvenile Services faced high probation officer caseloads, unproven treatment services, limited outcome data, and the inability to determine if probation services were actually doing more good than harm, it launched a Probation System Review. This process began in 2008 under the MacArthur Foundation's *Models for Change* initiative. Following a Probation System Review methodology detailed by Janet Wiig and John Tuell¹, a work plan was developed to explore four structural elements:

- Program Planning & Implementation
- Best Practices & Benchmarking
- Performance Measurement & Client Outcomes
- Intra- and Interagency Work Processes

Using this work plan from 2009 to 2012, members of the Jefferson Parish Probation Management Team led the effort to effectively change probation practices in the Parish with expectations that the reforms would lead to demonstrable long-term impacts. Several significant improvements included streamlining departmental management practices, enhancing development of probation officer roles, and improving probation officer working conditions. Data highlighted in *Probation Review Implementation: How Best Practices Meet Everyday Practices*² showed substantial impacts ranging from expanded use of evidence-based practices to reductions in secure commitments. Across most metrics, 2012 data consistently reflected impressive improvements resulting from the Probation System Review.



As noted in *Sustaining Change: A Models for Change Guidebook*, "long-term program sustainability is perhaps one of the most challenging issues facing new and innovative juvenile justice programs today."³ Jefferson Parish recognized this challenge and took steps to ensure that the probation reforms would endure. Using the key concepts and principles for sustainability described later in this brief, the Department of Juvenile Services has maintained the momentum, which is punctuated by both quantitative and qualitative outcomes. A few of these outcomes are discussed below.

Current Trends in Positive Probation Outcomes

The Probation System Review initially met expectations for demonstrable outcomes; however, the sustainability of these outcomes is the hallmark of lasting system reform. Data since 2012, the end of the probation system review in Jefferson Parish, shows continued improvements resulting from the implemented reforms. These improvements include better working conditions for probation officers, expanded use of screening and assessment practices, increased use of Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs), lower probation caseloads, and fewer youth detained for technical violations, to name a few.

Working condition improvements included increases in probation officer salaries and better retention of qualified probation officers. A survey of Louisiana juvenile probation officer salaries ranked Jefferson Parish juvenile probation officers salaries as one of the lowest. This information was essential for a year-long effort by department management to increase these salaries. The result was an average 14% increase in salaries for juvenile probation officers. The Probation Manager noted that since the salary increase, applicants for open probation positions have shown to be more qualified than in previous years. Further, probation officer attrition was as high as 29% prior to the salary increase; however, in 2015 attrition is less than 5%.

¹ Wiig & Tuell, 2011

² Ryals, 2013

³ Wiig, Coccozza, Morris, Shufelt, & Skowyra, 2010

In the Probation System Review, there was a concentrated effort to improve case planning by integrating assessments, service plans, and treatment services. This integration was essential for matching youth's needs to interventions, thereby addressing causes for delinquent behaviors and reducing further delinquent activities leading to arrests.

More specifically, case processing improvements began with the use of objective and reliable screening and assessment tools. One such tool, the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument -2 (MAYSI-2), a mental health screen, was used to assist in determining the need for further mental health evaluations. Cost data from 2009 to 2014 showed a 51% decrease in mental health evaluation costs when this screen was part of the decision-making process. This reduction in costs was partially due to fewer youth on probation and partially due to a reduction in unnecessary evaluations.

Case planning improvements also focused on implementation and use of EBPs to address needs identified on individual service plans. Under the *Models for Change* initiative, the use of evidence-based treatment practices increased from 7% in 2007 to 94% in 2014. This high level of youths' access to research-proven practices continues because EBPs are integral to positive client outcomes. As an illustration of the process, criminogenic needs are identified with an objective assessment tool. These needs are matched with a portfolio of EBPs that target those needs. Probation officers use a Treatment Referral Matrix to link youth to the right services based on needs and risk.

While many jurisdictions question whether EBPs are worthwhile investments, the use of screening and assessment tools and EBPs in Jefferson Parish contributed to significant cost savings. In fact, there was also a 38% decrease in costs for EBPs as a result of applying the right services for the right youth, which diminished the need for multiple and duplicative services.

The benefits of these savings are three-fold. First, matching needs to services improves youth outcomes with fewer interventions. Second, use of EBPs has shown to be financially beneficial because they target criminogenic needs more effectively. Third, cost savings were re-invested into alternatives to formal processing to support successful front-end diversion programming.

Probation officer caseloads, which affect officers' abilities to effectively manage cases, have also continued to decline following the Probation System Review. As a result of improved screening practices, there were 21% fewer new cases coming onto probation between 2012 and 2014, resulting in officer caseloads being reduced significantly. Fewer cases allowed probation officers to devote more time and effort to managing the most challenging cases. Enhanced case management resulted in fewer youth detained for probation violations. The number of youth placed in the detention facility declined by 23% from 2009 to 2014. Further, the percent of youth completing probation successfully jumped from 82% in 2009 to 91% in 2014.



Key Elements & Principles

Several publications highlight key elements and principles of sustaining reform. For example, strong leadership is one such factor recognized in *Improving the Effectiveness of Juvenile Justice Programs*.⁴ In addition, *Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach*⁵ highlights several common challenges of programs that have sustained reform.

Most salient, however, are common characteristics consistently cited in studies on sustainability:

- Involvement of local stakeholders
- Diverse and broad coalition of support
- Ability to modify the program
- Congruency of the mission and/or goals of the organization with the new program
- Presence of a program champion
- Availability of funding
- Practical sustainability plans implemented early in the projects
- Ability to demonstrate positive client outcomes and program effectiveness (Wiig et al. 3)⁶

Many of these elements contributed to the success of the Jefferson Parish Probation System Review. These items will be discussed in further detail in this section.

In Jefferson Parish sustaining momentum of probation reform was the result of mixing existing organizational resources with national best practices. Recognizing and building on the strengths of employees combined with definitive direction provided by national best practices gave validation to each goal achieved. With each successive goal attained, organizational knowledge, capability, and confidence increased.

Ultimately, the sustained outcomes can be attributed to a true cultural shift that continues to occur. Once a culture based on subjective decision-making, the culture now focuses on *effectiveness, fairness and fiscal responsibility*. Much of the cultural shift began with the jurisdiction's commitment to improving the service delivery system for youth while focusing on community safety. Technical assistance provided the spark that ignited enthusiasm and movement toward probation system improvements.

This culture shift was also the result of several key factors mentioned above that continue to support and drive sustained results. The following factors were particularly influential in sustaining the momentum towards improved outcomes.

Presence of a Program Champion – Leadership

For decades Jefferson Parish has benefited from strong leadership and effective champions. For the Probation System Review, the champion was the Director of the Department of Juvenile Services, Roy Juncker, Jr., who initiated the probation review and established a vision for future probation programming.

Over the years, however, leadership roles have migrated across agencies and across stakeholders due to an ever-changing political climate and staff turnover. When one leader leaves the system, another emerges to support reform efforts. Further, leaders inspire leaders. Leaders were not only those with positional authority, but also system stakeholders with the desire and abilities to lead specific efforts. Having a common mission and shared goals carried by effective leadership creates an environment where stakeholders develop, initiate, and take ownership of reforms. Leadership gives reforms momentum and permanency.

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⁴ Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Chapman, & Carver, 2010

⁵ National Research Council, 2013

⁶ Wiig, Coccozza, Morris, Shufelt, & Skowyra, 2010

Involvement of Local Stakeholders & Diverse and Broad Coalition Support

Most significant reforms involving stakeholder agencies stemmed from data shared through a long-standing collaborative known as the Children & Youth Planning Board (CYPB). This collaborative has been essential for designing and implementing reform across the juvenile justice system. It has also served as a forum for discussing and resolving challenging issues such as the development of an objective detention screening tool and reducing school-based arrests. Further, the Probation System Review relied on the CYPB to involve multi-agency stakeholders in the reform work. As the strength of the collaborative grew, its influence and support for probation system reform also strengthened.

Mission Congruity

As mentioned previously, a shared mission among stakeholders provides a unifying effect and helps focus energies. The vision of the Jefferson Parish Probation Department is to strengthen the community by reducing juvenile delinquency and other misconduct by establishing parent and youth accountability and equipping families with skills needed to live productively and responsibly in the community. Stemming from this vision are the goals of improving probation practices to reduce costs, protect the community, and improve youth outcomes.

The mission, vision, and goals of the Probation Department are shared by the Department of Juvenile Services and the Jefferson Parish Children & Youth Planning Board. Having the support of these organizations was essential for building the relationships necessary to implement and sustain challenging reforms.

Ability to Demonstrate Positive Client Outcomes and Program Effectiveness

Prior to engaging in the Probation System Review, management decisions were hindered by a lack of useful management information. While data was collected for decades prior, the information provided little insight into *how* the system was working or what impact the agency had on community safety or youth outcomes. Probation System Review work, along with

several other reform initiatives, placed emphasis squarely on data collection and analysis to demonstrate client outcomes and program effectiveness. Currently, the Department of Juvenile Services bases most decisions on data such as the number of arrests, successful completion of probation cases, and detention census information. Also considered are treatment referral costs and the number of youth who successfully complete probation. The Department is also undertaking the development of a custom case management system that utilizes national best practices⁷ to more easily identify client outcomes and the impact of probation on youth, families, and the community.

Practical Sustainability Plans Implemented Early & Availability of Funding

From its inception, Probation System Review work had a focus on sustaining reforms. While it is assumed that simple policy revisions are sufficient to ensure lasting change, long-term change requires more comprehensive efforts that draw strength from establishing desired outcomes. Based on best practice research, projections were made regarding the impact of probation reforms. Positive outcomes, such as lower probation caseloads, higher probation officer retention, and reduction of costs associated with treatment and evaluations, were anticipated. Through regular monitoring, data highlighted that the anticipated outcomes were becoming reality.

The challenge then became how to reinvest both personnel and financial resources to sustain reforms and build further momentum. One solution was to reinvest resources to expand front-end programs like the informal status youth and pre-trial diversion programs. Expanded capacity for these programs reduced the number of youth in formal proceedings, expedited service delivery, and afforded youth opportunities to receive EBPs without having to be placed formally on probation. This, in turn, further reduced the number of new probation cases, which impacts the probation department's ability to achieve client outcomes.

⁷ e.g., Siegel, 2014

Finally, sustainability requires ongoing workforce development. The Department of Juvenile Services, like many organizations, has constant shifts in personnel due to resignations, retirements, and promotions. It is essential for sustaining momentum to actively educate employees on reform activities, including cultural values, data collection and interpretation, and leadership. Seeking out future leaders and providing them opportunities to engage in reform work ensures the next generation of probation professionals have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to sustain probation reform.

Sustaining momentum of probation system reform is not complex. The process simply involves integrating a common set of principles into existing systems. The experience of Jefferson Parish has demonstrated the long-term benefits of such an effort – positive youth outcomes.

Resources

Lipsey, M.W., Howell, J.C., Kelly, M.R., Chapman, G., & Carver, D. (2010). *Improving the Effectiveness of Juvenile Justice Programs: A New Perspective on Evidence-Based Practice*. Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, Georgetown University. Available at: http://cjjr.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ImprovingEffectiveness_Deember2010.pdf

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Wiig, J.K., & Tuell, J.A. (2011). *Probation Review Guidebook*. Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps. John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Models for Change initiative. Available at: <http://rfknrcjj.org/resources/>