



## Walking the Line

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As I reflect on my first year as director of the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, I realize that together, we have been walking the line between often conflicting forces.

We're walking the line between a deficit-based approach and a positive youth development approach – between an approach that says we're successful if our kids simply “do no wrong” and one that says we aspire for more.

We're also walking the line between the old and the new, between being YSA and DYRS, a sub-cabinet agency and a cabinet agency, a beleaguered agency that was looked down upon and sued for unconstitutional conditions and one that is fighting for its place in the city government as a promising, forward-looking entity hoping to emerge from that law suit.

It also strikes me that, despite a tremendous amount of dissatisfaction with the two current deficit-based approaches to juvenile justice (law enforcement/correctional approach and the medical/mental illness model) no juvenile justice system in the US has fully embraced a Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach just yet.

Ours will be the first.

As we travel that road, or walk that line, together, it's my job to define that vision more clearly and to deploy and redeploy resources that help us get there. In the last few *From the Directors*, I've discussed new resources (Living Classrooms, MST, Intensive Third Party Monitoring, the National Juvenile Detention Association, and the Missouri Youth Services Institute) that are helping us become more strengths-based in our approach. In this column, I'll write a little more about the real world differences between the traditional juvenile justice approaches (JJ) and an approach typified by PYD.

### ***What's the Difference?***

To my mind, it all goes back to the motto I asked you to embrace early on – *Treat the young people like they're your own, but never forget they're someone else's*. I don't greet my daughter each day she comes back from high school by saying “Oh, I'm so proud of you, you didn't take drugs, get pregnant, or get arrested in school today!” and yet those are standards of achievement we set for our DYRS youth all the time. For us, our motto, vision<sup>1</sup> and mission<sup>2</sup> need to drive us towards two essential goals, which are consistent with the tenets of Positive Youth Development.

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<sup>1</sup> *DYRS will provide the nation's best continuum of care for court-involved youth and their families through a wide-range of programs that emphasize individual strengths, personal accountability, public safety, skill development, family involvement, and community support.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Mission of DYRS is to improve public safety and give court-involved youth the opportunity to become more productive citizens by building on the strengths of youth and their families in the least restrictive, most homelike environment consistent with public safety.*

One is, don't settle for a deficit-based approach, one that treats the floor of crimelessness and drug-free existence as if it is the ceiling, just like you wouldn't accept those lowered horizons for your own loved ones.

But the second part of the motto - "...*never forget they're someone else's*" - requires that we empower the youth and their families to be a part of developing their own plans of which they will, ultimately, be the primary executors.

We recognize that, for our own sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, cousins and God-children, the path to a problem-reduced life is through the achievement of certain competencies and skill sets. Our job as parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents and God-parents for our own, and care workers, JJICs and YCOs for our DYRS youth, is to help young people achieve those skills and competencies so they can flourish. An important byproduct of achieving adult competencies is the absence of anti-social behavior, but that is the floor, not the ceiling, we're aiming for.

### ***Get REAL!***

OK, so, by now, you're saying "I thought he was going to concretely explain Positive Youth Development and all he is doing is spouting theory again." So allow me to *get real* by juxtaposing the old with the new, PYD with JJ:

A Positive Youth Development Approach views the youth as an *active participant* in the change process, instead of as a *client* or *target of change*.

*The Key Strategy* for a traditional JJ approach is *control*; for PYD, it is *connecting the youth with community resources*. So, for example, a traditional JJ approach would send a youth to job counseling and order community service as a punishment; PYD would look to engage the youth in career exploration and career-path work experience and use community service as service learning and job preparation.

Most importantly, in the traditional JJ work, the aim is to *diminish a youth's problems or deficits*; in PYD, it is to *build on a youth's strengths and assets*.

### ***Give me a couple of examples***

OK – Here's two.

Over the past 6 months, three different entities associated with DYRS have been grappling with the issue of changing our treatment planning approach from a traditional medical/mental health model "treatment team" approach to one that is more empowering and asset-based called alternately – Family Team Meetings (FTMs) or Family Group Conferencing. The Treatment Team Improvement Team, the Center for Community Empowerment, and the Interagency Collaboration Task Force<sup>3</sup> have all concluded that case plans can and should be developed cooperatively with youth, their families, all agencies affecting the youth's life, and community members, including vendors and non-vendors – in other words, through FTMs.

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<sup>3</sup> For those of you not familiar with this group, it originally started as me, Marti Knisley (DMH), Brenda Donald Walker (CFSA) and Terri Odom (CSS). Since Brenda Donald Walker is now the Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth Families and Elders, she has brought this collaboration in-house and infused it with some new energy, and APRA has been added to the mix.

For many of us (me included) this will involve challenging our training and experience. As a social worker, I know I was trained to sequentially interview key respondents, go back to my office and develop a case plan. All too often, that training was in identifying a client's needs and deficits and creating a plan that was designed to "cure" them.

FTMs involve sharing the power over plan development with the youth, their family, and other government and non-government agencies and community members. The theory (borne out in other places where FTMs are routine, including DC's CFSA) is that having "owned" the planning process, the youth and family will now "own" the plan, rather than resist it as something externally imposed.

The work of these three committees has reached a critical point where we now need to make some decisions (i.e. Who will organize these FTMs, DYRS workers or community groups or both? When will we initiate them, pre-adjudication? After adjudication but before disposition? Post-commitment? Some combination?). These decisions all have staffing and resource deployment ramifications.

There are (at least) three things you need to know right now about these decisions:

1. We have gathered enough (or nearly enough) information and had enough discussions, internally and externally, to make these decisions.
2. We WILL make these decisions within the next 45 days.
3. These decisions will be imperfect and will have many advantages over the previous approach, along with some disadvantages and challenges.

Once we decide when our FTMs will take place and who will organize them, we will be talking with you all about it, conducting trainings, and thoughtfully and professionally implementing the change that will take us one step closer to becoming the nation's first PYD-based juvenile justice agency.

The second example is inviting a parents group (Parent Watch) and a youth-led advocacy organization (Justice 4 DC Youth) into our midst as partners to help us reform our system and empower consumers of our services (i.e. parents and youth) to become active participants in setting policies that affect their lives. We have supported the DC Council in providing funding to Parent Watch, and we have supported foundations to provide funding to Justice 4 DC Youth. The J4DCY chapter that they will soon be opening at Oak Hill will be the first such chapter of a youth advocacy organization inside a locked facility in the country.

So that's where we're going. Now let's take a brief look at what outcomes we can rightly claim for our first year.

### ***Outcomes so far...***

One final word needs to be said about our outcomes so far.

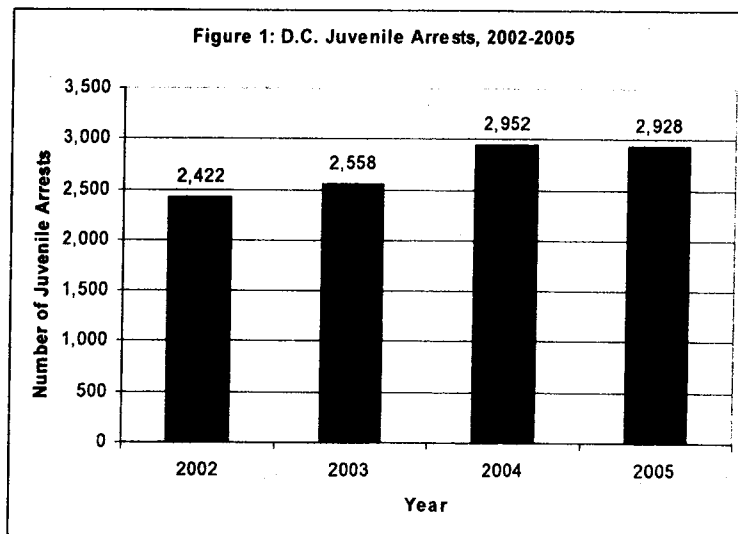
Mostly, if we're being honest with ourselves, that word is, too early to tell.

Most of our new programs are in their start-up phase, and Year 1 has been dominated by base-building which should start reaping positive outcomes shortly<sup>4</sup>. For every program that's exceeded expectations (96% of our kids weren't rearrested in the Evening Reporting Center Program) there are disappointing results (31% of youth getting MST services, an extremely well respected national model, have been rearrested).

This is typical of any start up endeavor; it's why half of all restaurants fail in the first year, for example. Lots of start ups fail, our job is to evaluate fairly and make course adjustments. If you look at some of the more well-respected juvenile justice systems in the country (Chicago and Missouri to name two) they went through lots of bumps and scrapes initially before turning the corner. By staying the course and going through (sometimes painful) self-examination, they won out in the end and have been able to create systems that incarcerate fewer kids, treat them more decently, and have substantially better public safety outcomes.

Some have suggested that, as we're going through our changes, we're making our neighborhoods less safe. Thankfully, the evidence does not bear that out. In fact, it appears as though a disturbing trend of increasing juvenile arrests and killings from the two years predating my arrival may be showing signs of abating. Last year, after two years of increasing juvenile crime and homicides, juvenile crime overall, and killings by and of youth, fell in 2005.

Overall, as you can see from Figure 1 below, in 2005, there was a slight (0.8%) *drop* in overall juvenile arrests. This came after a 22% increase in juvenile arrests over the previous two years. By contrast, overall arrests of adults *increased* by 0.5% in 2005.



The loss of any life to violent crime is a tragedy, doubly so when that loss of life is a young person with their whole life ahead of them. I know how difficult it is for our staff to lose young people with whom you have developed close relationships and whom you have worked hard to point in the right direction. Fortunately, both homicides by and against young people happened less frequently in 2005 than in the previous year.

<sup>4</sup> The notable exception to this is the work done at the Youth Services Center in conjunction with the National Juvenile Detention Association. The quality of life for both youth and staff has improved dramatically over the past 6 months and we are hopeful of even greater things in the months to come.

Figure 2 below shows that, in 2005 the number of youth between the ages of 10 and 17 who lost their lives through violence declined substantially. In 2005, 56% fewer young people were killed than in 2004.

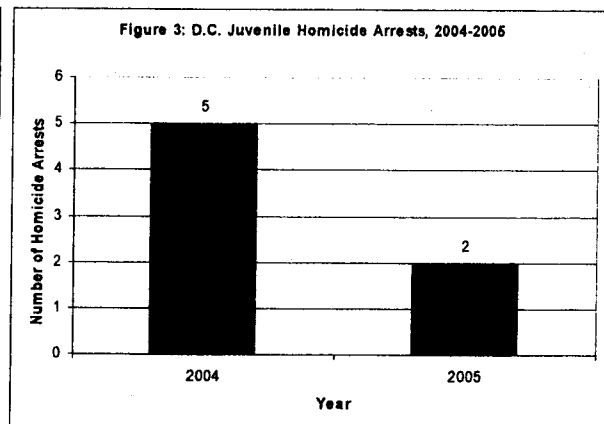
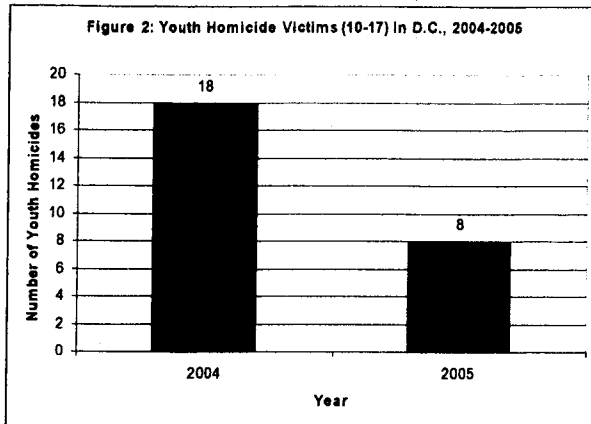


Figure 3 above shows that fewer youth were arrested for homicides in 2005 than in 2004 as well. There was a 60% decline in D.C. arrests for juvenile homicides between 2004 and 2005.

In a previous *From the Director* (May 17, 2005, available on our intranet web site at <http://ysa.in.dc.gov/>) I wrote to you about how, as DC's juvenile incarceration rate was cut nearly in half between 1995 and 2003, juvenile homicides dropped by 92% and violent juvenile crime was cut in half.

Just locking kids up doesn't result in better outcomes for kids or more public safety.

It never has...

It never will...

As we walk this line together, we'll be traveling in sometimes uncharted territory, which will get uncomfortable and feel uncertain at times. But nothing worth doing is easy. I look forward to taking this journey with you and to discussing these issues with you all in town hall meetings, staff meetings, hallways and elevators, and I encourage you to ask me tough questions and bring your ideas to the table. Our only chance of success is by working and struggling together, and you have my full commitment to do that as openly and honestly as I can.

Thanks, and keep up the good work.

*Winny*

