

**TRANSITION PLANNING BASED ON  
RESEARCH, PROGRAM DESIGN, AND  
DYNAMIC DEVELOPMENT**

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**JAMES H. KEELEY, Ed. D.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Effective transition for juvenile and adult offenders is necessary and required by legislation, policy and goals of public safety. To deliver effective transition, program design and development must be built on research, governmental mandates, and agency policy and procedures. This paper incorporates recent research on variables affecting juveniles during the institutionalized period and the steps emphasized in one State in the United States to develop and implement an effective transition program.

This paper combines research on institutionalized juvenile populations in Pennsylvania as a power point presentation and updates a paper presented at the *2004 Transition Conference on National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for Children and Youth who are Neglected and Delinquent, and At Risk*.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a recent story about a youth who returned to a state institution for delinquents several months after release. He went through the typical institutional admission regimen of an interview with his casework counselor, health screening, assignment to a residential unit, and reassessment by the school counselor. When the principal saw the youth, he asked him how he had made out at school when he had been released before? The student replied that he didn't go to school. Why, the Principal asked? The youth replied, "because nobody called me!"

Most people who hear this story laugh or nod their heads in a knowing manner. The assumption is that the youth was being naive to expect his school district to come looking for him or practicing school avoidance. This makes sense for numerous reasons. The school personnel may not know he is available for school, they do not want to know, or are content not to have to deal with him again. On the other hand, why should the youth expect less. His transition plan from the institution had been the work of professionals. The plans made sense, and it included returning to school. The problem had been that his participation in its design and development had been almost like that of a bystander. In addition, the students' interest, intention on release, or support systems had not been effectively considered.

What happened to his transition plan? When he was released from the institution, one had been prepared and provided to the court and his probation officer. A school transcript was available to his home school. Unfortunately, that plan fulfilled bureaucratic regulations and was considered complete. In reality, little effective work had been done to make personal connections with those in the community, like the school. Establishing and building connections are important to successful transition (Pollard, Pollard, & Meers, 1995). They could have set up appointments and made connections with specific educational and other service providers that would have improved his chances for reintegration to school and the community. He had been placed on probation, but apparently that did not help.

Effective transition planning did not occur. The student fell through the cracks, picked up his delinquent ways again, and was back at the institution for another term.

Obviously, it is his fault. His naive or avoidance behavior and expectations of waiting for a phone call from the school and probably other service providers was the reason he fell through the fault line in community programs and services.

Was his behavior so unusual? At an age of about 17 years, is his behavior so different from that of the non-delinquent youth on their way to post secondary education, the military or other opportunities? How many of these youth would find their way to continuing education or the other opportunities, if they did not have someone like parents or counselors to guide them? Perhaps many of these other youth could still be sitting on the sofa in our living rooms waiting for someone to call them.

In the United States since 1997, the emphasis on effective and participatory transition was mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act for special education youth. This affects approximately 50% of the youth in Pennsylvania's State Youth Development Center System. This mandate was effectively broadened to include all the youth in these institutions when President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act. Within this Act, Title 1 for neglected and delinquent youth stipulated that transition plans be developed for them.

In Pennsylvania, transition for delinquent youth from state residential institutions in the Youth Development Center System operated by the Department of Welfare has been part of the treatment program for many years. It is built upon individual assessment, diagnosis, treatment planning, and program delivery. The institutions' residential and education staff operate under separate legislation but function in a flexible but cooperative manner. They have traditionally developed treatment plans with consideration of the directions from the juvenile county court's commitment orders. Education is the responsibility of the Department of Education and is provided by contracted public education agencies.

Students' transition plans have been developed by the institutional staff but typically as a placement termination activity. The transition plan was based on institutional programming and recommendations rather than being a tool for actual connection with programs and services when the youth returned to their home community. Implementation of the plans and success beyond the court release hearings was usually not made known to the institutions' staff. In this paper, the focus is on the

process for improving institutional transition. To be truly effective, the long-term emphasis must inclusive planning of all relevant parties in order to have documentable outcomes.

In July of 2003, the state directors responsible for the education and residential programs in these institutions from the Departments of Education and Welfare met to address the effectiveness and efficacy of the transition plans being developed at the institutions. The goals of each Department for transition were clarified. This set the stage for improved coordination among the respective staffs. These directors held follow up meetings with the institutional directors and school principal at the Loysville Youth Development Center (LYDC) and Secure Treatment Unit (LSTU). The existing transition process, status, and goals of transition were analyzed. The outcome was to empower the respective staff at LYDC and LSTU to take the lead in revitalizing the process. It required a review of current policy and procedures in order to create a more useful model for transition. Issues related to student involvement, internal operations and external connections that were obstacles to an effective model were identified. A plan was established and put into practice. This allowed the practice to be based on policy rather than the dynamics of staff personalities. This is being done within existing budgets by shifting funds between approved categories.

#### **INSTITUTION AND POPULATION PROFILE**

The LYDC and LSTU are for adjudicated males. They are located on a single campus in rural Central Pennsylvania. LYDC is an 88-bed open residential facility with an average age of 16 and range of 12 – up to 21. LSTU is an 18-bed secure treatment facility with an average age of 17.5 years and range of 13 – up to 21. Respective months in placement averages are 9 and 13+ months.

Educationally, the youth are 3 – 5 years deficient, which is consistent with national averages for youth in residential juvenile justice placement.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 65% of the students had pre placement identifications as eligible for special education and had active Individualized Education Plans (IEP). At placement, students in juvenile

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placement exhibit a range of disabilities that has been estimated to be three to nine times that of the national average.<sup>2</sup>

### **BACKGROUND, GOALS, AND PROBLEMS**

Transition means movement, passage, or change from one position, state, stage, to another according to Webster's College Dictionary (1991). In the field of corrections, it usually refers to the movement of an adjudicated or convicted individual from one stage of secure restriction or confinement to a lower level. In the context of release from incarceration, this is most often recognized as returning to their home community.

Research indicates that of the 1.3 million inmates in prison now, 97% will return to their/our communities (Barnett & Parent, 2002). In 2000, Hughes, Beck, and Wilson (2001) indicated that more than 652,000 adult offenders were under state parole supervision throughout the United States. Each of these individuals requires a transition plan. This number grows each year. Similar conditions exist for juvenile offenders. Greater percentages enter and exit the juvenile justice system annually than adults do in the criminal justice system. Each year approximately 100,000 juveniles return to their communities (Sickmund, 2000). This is due to shorter time in placement. The need for transition is well known. It is recommended and documented in many reports and articles.<sup>3</sup> It was estimated that \$51,000 (USD) could be saved annually from a youth not reentering the juvenile justice system (Bullis, Yovanoff, Mueller, & Havel, 2002). The realization that this component of juvenile justice service has been advocated and recommended for at least three decades indicates that the provision has been less than adequate. It still needs to be appropriately addressed. Recent research indicates that the age and intentions of youth have a significant effect on their post placement activities especially as it relates to school participation. In another area, the level of involvement by the youth, their family, institutional staff, and the community also affect these activities.

Increasing public safety, protecting the community, reducing recidivism, avoiding new victimization, teaching accountability, building competencies, making better use of resources found in and around corrections, and reducing costs are the goals of transition

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programs. The external part of transition is to enable an offender to return to their community with an active plan for reintegration. This plan includes the continuation of educational, family, health, and judicial programs implemented during placement in local jurisdictions. It was recognized that the transition plan that only included the treatment program at the institution was a partial plan. To be complete, it needed the inclusion of the external programs and service providers. It is now connected to community providers and they are becoming actively involved through the MCPC process.

The transition process faces serious problems in most jurisdictions as outlined in the National Institute of Corrections' Transition from Prison to Community Initiative (2002). It is not protecting public safety sufficiently due to ineffective interventions, and narrowly focused release planning and implementation. Juvenile and Criminal Justice agencies inside and outside the institution have inconsistent priorities. Human service providers outside the institutions also have conflicts with the priorities of the justice agencies. Where transition policies and practices exist there is a dearth of continuity among them. In addition, laws, regulations, and daily practice interfere with the effective sharing of information between and among agencies critical to planning and implementing a successful transition.

Besides the problems found between the various agencies, the offenders face several obstacles that hinder effective participation in their own transition planning. Often, the connections between short and long-term objectives and goals in staff developed treatment plans are vague or not clearly explained to the youth. Youth are only marginally part of the process. Serving long sentences, sometimes to the end of the maximum sentence/placement imposed, and frequent probation/parole violations deter them from entering programs. In addition, program cuts due to declining budgets have demoralizing affects and negatively effect involvement.

### **PILOT PROJECT GOALS, CHALLENGES, AND PROGRESS**

The goals of transition plans for the youth at the Loysville Campus have different driving forces for the residential and education staff. Residential staff works to meet the requirements of the Balanced Approach to Restorative Justice (BARJ) utilizing the Master Case Planning System (MCPC). This clearly stipulates regulations, timelines, and internal departmental input for creating a treatment plan for each youth. The education

staff respond to the requirements of IDEA for students identified as needing special services, Title 1 N&D provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act, and the intent of BARJ, although not specifically directed at education. BARJ, MCPC, IDEA, and Title 1 N&D all mandate that transition plans be developed for youth. These plans must incorporate any services that a youth may require during placement and afterwards in order to be successful in their community.

The operational goals of the Loysville pilot transition project are to improve the transferability of progress and momentum achieved in the institutional programs to the community. This is done by identifying and overcoming internal and external obstacles to effective treatment and transition planning. One of those obstacles identified relates to finding mutually convenient times for meetings that would improve scheduling notices and optimize participation while minimizing program disruption. A day a week was identified to hold the student review meetings but unavailability of some staff on a consistent basis was problem. A partial, low cost solution for the education department has been to hire a Title 1 transition aide to assist the development of the education part of transition plan. In turn, the residential staff is working plans to increase the participation from their various departments. This is important to the effectiveness of the meeting process and outcomes. The meetings are conducted on two levels but deliver to the overarching MCPS. There are formal MCPC meetings at the end of the first month, fifth month, and then at 3 month intervals. For eligible students, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is to be in place by the end of 45 days. Depending upon the availability of educational records, an interim or complete education plan is incorporated into the initial MCPC. It is at these meetings that the expectations for transition are initially established.

To facilitate student progress tracking, an action chart was developed by the school. This chart identifies goals, objectives, responsibilities, and timelines for both student and staff to follow. It also serves to provide data and information for the MCPC reports. The feasibility of extending this type of chart to other departments is being examined.

Insuring student participation and accountability had to be strengthened. In the intervening months between the formal MCPC meetings, less formal multidisciplinary team (MDT) meetings of institutional staff are convened to assess the student's progress.

When the student is making acceptable progress, the review quickly confirms it and the treatment plan is continued unaltered. Should a need be identified for a change to the formal plan, a special MCPC meeting can be convened with all the stakeholders participating, including the youth. As necessary, the MCPC treatment plan can be modified to assist the youth in achieving the goals of his plan. Redundant meetings have been eliminated by utilizing the MDT meetings as the basis for completing the formal reports required after the MCPC meetings are held. Implementation during the initial phase-in experienced some delays because the expectations for meeting processes and outcome were interpreted differently by the residential and educational staffs. The goals and objectives of the meeting were reviewed and discussed in light of past practice. The past practice had to be addressed and redesigned for a more inclusive model. This required some paradigm shifting on the part of the education and residential staff within their areas of responsibility and where overlap occurred.

Another challenge was the involvement of the external community. It was recognized that the transition process could be improved by inviting and including the participation of families, court personnel, community service providers, education, employers, and other interested parties at all treatment review meetings. The current process would be changed to include them at the initial MCPC rather than toward the end of incarceration or placement.

The participation is designed to begin with the first formal MCPC meeting. It will enable the youth and those who will have contact, and or influence the youths' future to have a role in designing, developing, and delivering services and supports needed to be successful at the institution and in their home community. Through their involvement, pro-active adjustments can be made to the treatment plan depending on the progress the youth makes during placement.

Responsibility for contacting the external participants had to be clearly delegated. To increase external individual and agency contributions, an internal division of duties was defined in order to gain the involvement of those participants. Residential and education staff worked on this from logical and normal contact perspectives to determine who would be the primary contact to these participants. These contacts are now made by

mail and phone to have their participation at the initial and subsequent MCPC meetings at the least, and all treatment meetings whenever possible.

Experience has shown that some agencies will not be able to participate in meetings on the campus because they have multiple youth in placement here. The challenge is to consecutively schedule reviews so that they can address all their youth during one session. The change for education was having comprehensive involvement for all the students, not just those with an IEP. The advantage and benefits for all the participants is that all the goals and objectives of the IEP can be presented, discussed, and accepted by a larger and more committed committee at one meeting.

For other service providers, funding restrictions impede their participation. In most situations, a service provider may not be able to work with a youth until they are released from the institution back in the community and on their caseload. The payment for services that these providers receive may not be authorized until the youth is actually in the community. Therefore, participating in planning meetings at the institution are not billable activities and its effects are noticeable. This continues to be a challenge and solutions are being explored.

It was recognized that participation at the institution by of the external stakeholders might not be possible due to long travel distances or the timing of the meeting. To address this, a teleconferencing system was made available. This enables those participants who are unable to be on site to participate.

### **CONCLUSION**

With the publication of research on youth in Pennsylvania juvenile residential institutions, the awareness of the importance of including a youth's intentions was recognized and incorporated (Keeley, 2004). In addition, the findings on the varied uses of community, collaboration and vocational programming has been utilized as a means of improving the efforts in these areas (Morrison, 2004).

Knowing the intentions of a youth for his post placement activities sets the ground work for a jointly developed transition plan based on realistic expectations and commitment. The high level of participation by all the stakeholders emphasizes the importance of the treatment plan to the youth. In addition, it enables the stakeholders to increase their familiarization with the youth, articulate the extent of their programs or

services, know the progress made during placement, and be prepared for them upon release. For the youth, similar familiarization is built with the providers. Their expectations are known and treatment programs initiated during placement are continued after release. This level of involvement provides the youth, institutional staff, and community services providers with ongoing and up to date information that contributes to building success. Success is proportional to the level of involvement and ownership by all of the transition team.

It is a considerable improvement over a system that only focused on transition in the last 60 – 90 days of placement. When the youth leaves placement, they will know the community service personnel with whom they will be working, have definite appointments already scheduled, and know where they are expected to be whether for school or other programs.

A system that includes the youth, family members, residential staff, institutional education staff, court personnel, community service providers, and local school officials will take the guesswork out of aftercare expectations for the youth. For the members of the youth's MCPC team, they will know how much progress was made during placement, treatment and court expectations, and regimens to be followed in aftercare programs. Youth will also know their progress, court and community expectations, and the steps to continue in order to become crime free and contributing citizens. Transition planning is the key to successful community reentry. "Unless you have that follow-up care in the community you've wasted your money" (Inciardi in Alexander, 2003, pg. 10). Unless someone assists the delinquent youth *to make the phone call* he runs a disproportional risk of becoming an itinerant prisoner in our country's burgeoning prisons because he will continue to fall through the fault lines in institutional and community services and programs!

### NOTES

1. Research from the past 15 years indicates this estimate has not experienced much change as reported by Cottle, 1998; Keeley, 1999; LeBlanc, Pfannenstiel, & Tashjian, 1991; Rider-Hankins, 1992; Wilson, 2000.
2. These estimates have persisted for approximately 25 years as reported by: Alexander, 2003; Cottle, 1998; Keeley, 2000; Leone, Zaremba, Chapin & Iseli, 1995; Lewis, Schwartz and Ianacone, 1988; Morgan, 1979; Nelson, Rutherford & Wolford, 1987; Rider-Hankins, 1992; United States Department of Education, 1998; Wolford, 2000.
3. For related research see: Ashcroft 2000; Coates, Miller and Ohlin, 1975; Gemignani, 1994; Ingersoll and LeBoeuf 1997; LeBlanc, et al. 1991; Lewis, et al. 1988; Maddox, Webb, Allen, Faust, Abrams, and Lynch 1984; Rider-Hankins 1992; Stafford and Sellers, 2001; Stephens and Arnette 2000; and Wilson 2000.

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### **ADDENDUM**

Research in Juvenile Correctional Education by James H. Keeley, Ed D and Marybeth Morrison, Ph D, Power Point presentation, October 2005.