

Example of Systems Change in Columbia County: Teen & Family Transition Program

What can be done to keep kids in school and decrease juvenile crime? That was the challenge faced by participants in Columbia County's Juvenile Crime Prevention planning sessions of 1995. They knew their youth were less likely to become involved in crime if they were successful in school, so whatever strategy they adopted would need to take that into account.

To meet the challenge, community partners, including schools, the juvenile department, and the local commission, came together to create the Teen and Family Transition Program. It began serving at-risk middle and high school youth and their families that same year.

Stan Mendenhall, Columbia County Juvenile Department Director, summarized his department's view of the program in this way: "The Teens in Transition program provides a critical service to the juvenile department. I can direct parents and teens having difficulties to this program for impartial information and service."

Services, which include family conflict resolution and anger management, are delivered in the home, at school or wherever the youth and family can easily access them. Hours are flexible to meet the needs of families. Requests for services are responded to within one working day, and crisis response is available. The program works closely with both the schools and the juvenile department. When needed, referrals are made to other community resources, such as alcohol and drug abuse intervention.

Seth Battles, LCSW, who manages the program, sees his role as helping kids master the tools that will allow them to deal with negative issues in their life in a healthy manner and to feel safe. "I believe one of the ways this program is successful is that I use a strength-based, solution-focused approach," says Battles. Rather than focus on what they've done wrong (which in most cases already has been pointed out to them), we work together to find out what they can do right, identify their strengths and goals, and work from a positive base to positive goals."

This program has become an integral part of the service delivery system for teens in Columbia County. Community partners recognize that keeping youth out of the juvenile justice and protective services systems is a wise use of local dollars, and Teens in Transition does just that.

Beth¹, one of the youth served by the Teen and Family Transition program, says “I had attempted suicide and would have been dead if it weren’t for this program. I was a victim of sexual assault and had a bad relationship with my mom since the 6th grade. Seth gave me tools to cope with what was going on around me. He called and checked on me. He still does!”

Beth had been referred to other services when her angry behavior caused trouble at school. Beth finally dropped out of school and was using alcohol. She says, “I didn’t care what the world had to say.” She stopped participating in the services and refused to go back. Then she remembered hearing about Seth Battles at Columbia Community Mental Health and asked to talk with him.

Seth says that Beth is an example of what makes his job such a rewarding one. She is just one of many for whom the normal systems failed to provide the support that was needed. In essence, she had “fallen through the cracks” of the social safety net.

The fact that the Teen and Family Transition Program is free, with no waiting lists, and totally accessible is a huge boon to kids like Beth. She had the intelligence and resiliency to succeed; she just needed a helping hand to guide her down that path.

Beth is now working and in college and still uses the tools she learned. She is in a support group for those coping with alcohol abuse. She has repaired her relationship with her mother. Most importantly, she knows when and how to get help for problems.

Jan Spika Kenna, Director of the Commission on Children and Families, adds, “Beth is just one example of the 2,000 youth who have participated in the program since 1995.” During that time, nearly 95% of those youth have not re-entered the juvenile justice or child welfare system a year after services were completed. The program is expected to demonstrate, through research based assessments, that 75% percent of youth served will show an increase in life problem solving skills. “Through coming together, examining data and information pointing to what the community needs, then designing a service that works in that community, we have actually changed the system for the better” says Kenna.

Funding for the program requires that it have best practice components and that it achieve results. Clearly, it does. The program is evaluated by the Columbia County Commission on Children and Families in partnership with youth, parents, community partners and state evaluators

¹ Name has been changed to protect confidentiality

