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Douglas County Youth Impact Challenges Evaluation Report

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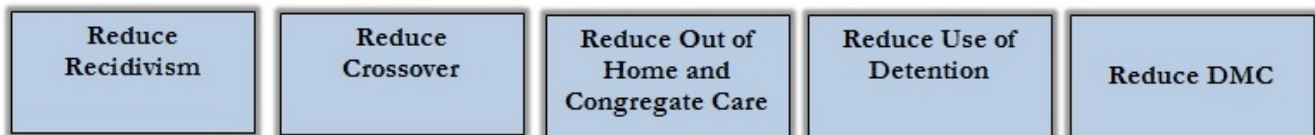


VIEWS OF CHALLENGES FROM THE PROFESSIONALS INVOLVED

Douglas County Youth Impact! is a practice model designed to prevent “crossover” youth from moving further into the child welfare or juvenile justice systems. The target population for this initiative is youth that meet the following criteria: 1) the youth must have been referred to the County Attorney’s office for: a) a status offense, or b) a law violation; and 2) the youth has a child welfare case which is: a) open, b) closed within the last 12 months, c) voluntary, or d) court-involved.

The initiative began in Douglas County in February 2012 and was fully implemented by November 2012. The initiative brings together county attorneys, child welfare workers, juvenile justice agents, and youth and family advocates in a “team meeting” to discuss crossover cases with each other, and the youth and their families. This process informs the decision of the county attorney regarding whether to file the case, dismiss it, divert, or require enhanced child welfare services. At each meeting, the crossover youth and their family members are given the opportunity to tell their story and give their perspective on the incident(s) that brought them into the juvenile justice system.

Standard System Goals for Crossover Youth Practice Model



In 2014, researchers from the University of Nebraska, Omaha, with support from the Sherwood Foundation, began an evaluation of the Youth Impact! (YI!) initiative in Douglas County. Among other things, the evaluation is intended to a) understand the processes, successes, and challenges that the team has gone through in order to implement YI! and b) use these “lessons learned” to inform similar and larger initiatives which are designed to enhance the system response to at-risk youth. The following is a brief synopsis the YI! professionals’ views on challenges that the initiative has faced.

Challenge #1: Differing Philosophies about Crossover Youth.

The systems in which the crossover youth is embedded – the child welfare and juvenile justice systems – have differing views and philosophies about the youth: the child welfare system typically views the child as primarily a victim who is in need of services, while the juvenile justice system typically views the youth as an offender in need of rehabilitation and accountability. These different philosophies sometimes resulted in different views about what the best course of action was for the youth. Finding the right balance between providing service and empowerment to crossover youth and their families while holding them accountable for wrongdoing requires “finesse” among the team members, and continues to be a “balancing act.” To keep the initiative on-track, leaders often remind members of the broader goal of YI!, which is to better serve youth in Douglas County; the mantra of “we’re in this together for the same reasons” often helps to get team members back on the same page.

Challenge #2: Implementing change when faced with the realities of “system” work.

There are some realities of working in “the system” that the professionals recognized might influence Youth Impact! over time – including turnover amongst team members due to promotions, disinterest, or “burnout.” They also noted that across-agency collaborations were at times difficult, given the “institutional histories” between various agencies that have not always been collaborative. Others cited problems relating to resources, particularly when collaborating agencies could not agree on who was to pay for services to crossover youth. Finally, some YI! professionals acknowledged that the system is still not very “family friendly,” meaning that problems presenting to crossover youth and their families do not necessarily only happen between the hours of 9am-5pm.

Challenge #3: Limited resources and no formal or institutionalized structure raises concerns about sustainability over time.

Youth Impact! is not institutionalized in Douglas County – it has no formal financial backing, no “central hub of management,” and is currently relying on relationships between team members to keep the initiative moving forward; this concerns many team members the most. For instance, “mission drift” is a serious concern for this initiative because of the lack of a formal “leader:” when disagreements or factions arise, it can be more disruptive because the team does not have a “boss” to keep everyone in line. Team members suggested that “succession planning” in key positions (e.g., the chair and co-chair) is needed for long-term sustainability, so that if (and when) turnover in these positions occurs, mission drift is minimized and the momentum of the initiative is not seriously impacted.

Challenge #4: Personal and professional challenges of agency professionals and crossover youth.

Agency professionals involved in YI! cited issues in time, effort/energy, and resources as major challenges they faced in working on the initiative. For the most part, the team members acknowledged that their work on YI! was meaningful and worth it, but nonetheless time consuming and (at times) draining. Some professionals also noted the difficulty of getting a deep understanding of the youth’s circumstances in just one hour. Others suggested that the setting of the meeting, with 8 or more professionals at the table with the youth, can be intimidating and awkward. Meeting the accessibility needs (e.g., timing of meeting, transportation, etc.) of the youth and his or her family can also be difficult. Team members also noted the difficulties of engaging youth and their families who don’t seem to want to be there or don’t want help: despite the group’s best intentions, YI! professionals are nonetheless representatives of the juvenile justice and child welfare systems – systems which most youth and families want to avoid. Finally, there may be long-standing negative views of “the system” from citizens that are difficult to change.

This document is a product of an evaluation project conducted by Emily Wright, Associate Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, and Ryan Spohn, Director of the Nebraska Center for Justice Research. Both researchers are affiliated with the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. Funding for this evaluation project was generously provided by The Sherwood Foundation.

