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## Youth Impact! of Douglas County: Views of Success from the Professionals Involved

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## **VIEWS OF SUCCESSSES 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.

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 of the YI! professionals’ views on successes that the initiative has yielded.

### **Success #1: Better decision-making for crossover youth because decision-makers get a more complete picture of the youth and his or her family situation.**

Prosecutors indicated that they gained more insight about the youth’s case and surrounding circumstances by participating in the weekly “team meetings,” and this often went beyond the information they would be able to get from the police report. They noted that hearing from social workers, youth advocates, and the youth and family themselves provided a deeper understanding of the situations that may have precipitated the youth’s misbehavior. Other team members reiterated the value of obtaining information and professional expertise from multiple sources. Additionally, gaining a better “whole picture” of what was going on in the youth’s life also made the attorney feel more confident about their decision regarding the case.

### **Success #2: Increased interagency collaboration and reduction in information silos may reduce costs to the system.**

Professionals routinely indicated that their relationships with other professionals in other agencies involved in YI! have become stronger over time, and this has improved the flow of information across agencies, as well as increased their understanding of what other agencies can (and can’t) do for crossover youth. The increased flow of information between agencies has also likely reduced the duplication of services that are offered to the youth, which may in turn lead to reductions in costs for each case.

### **Success #3: Increased trust between professionals and their agencies leads to continued support for the initiative, and fosters energy for continued improvement.**

Agency professionals suggested that getting to know others from other agencies has benefited them in personal and professional ways. For instance, child welfare professionals often work very closely with probation officers in YI!, which has led to increased trust between the personnel. Subsequently, this had led to some cross-agency trainings on the topics of crossover youth, trauma, and related topics. Such initiatives likely would not have been created if it weren't for their collaboration through YI! Further, seeing the same people "at the table" each week not only increased trust and collaborations between the team members, but this also effectively led to sustained inertia among the members to continue the collaboration.

### **Success #4: Improved responsiveness to crossover youth and families leads to positive outcomes for them, and benefits the juvenile justice system.**

Professionals involved in YI! saw the initiative as doing something different from the status quo in juvenile justice, particularly by allowing the youth to have "a voice" in which they could describe to the YI! team the events that brought them to the attention of the juvenile justice system. This information helped the team identify and better respond to the youth's needs by "getting to the root of the problem," as one team member said. This, in turn, led to reductions in duplications of services across systems, and more often resulted in outcomes such as diversion, or enhanced services for those youth who "don't belong" in the juvenile system (but instead required services). Additionally, the team identified positive outcomes for the youth, which they believe will become increasingly evident over time, such as increased time to recidivate, reduced severity of offenses, and less trauma and stigma experienced by the youth. They also noted that such positive benefits for the youth would likely translate into benefits for the juvenile justice system, such as lower caseloads for system personnel, lower associated costs with case filing and processing, fewer court fees, and related expenses.

Youth Outcomes for Crossover Youth Practice Model in Douglas County

<u>At Home</u>	<u>In School</u>	<u>Legal Involvement</u>	<u>Prosocial Activities</u>
Youth will reside at home or in a stable placement whenever possible	Youth will have improved school attendance	Youth will experience no new referrals to County Attorney	Youth will increase their participation in prosocial activities

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.

