

Community Over Incarceration *New Program For Juveniles Targets Causes*

By Ed Smith

A new community-based initiative to rehabilitate youth who have run afoul of the law is being introduced into rural parts of Virginia, including the Rockbridge area.

Multisystemic Therapy (MST), a method of treatment that emphasizes the involvement of family members, is being offered in Rockbridge County, Buena Vista and Lexington through the Waynesboro juvenile probation office.



"In almost all cases, a child's family is a critical part of their life and rehabilitation," said Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice Director Andy Block. "And yet, Virginia has lacked evidence-based family interventions in much of the state. With these new programs, and those we will add in the coming months, we will provide highly effective evidence-based programs for high-risk youth and their families – programs which research shows cost less, and gain better outcomes, than incarceration."

Buena Vista native Beth Mohler Stinnett, statewide program manager for DJJ's Division of Community Programs, has played a prominent role in bringing MST to this part of Virginia.

"I am very proud to have led the state reform efforts that have resulted in evidence-

based services being made available in previously underserved areas of the state," said Stinnett, a Parry McCluer High School graduate beginning her 25th year in state government. "I am especially pleased that



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the service area will include rural areas of the state such as Lexington, Rockbridge County and Buena Vista."

An objective of MST, said Stinnett, is to keep youths within their homes and communities, rather than having them placed in correctional facilities. Research shows that community-based treatment without incarceration costs less and is more effective, she said.

She and other DJJ officials note that MST therapists engage in intensive treatment and are available 24 hours a day in the communities where the youth and their families live.

"There is a never-ending focus on engagement while working in tandem with primary caregivers and other stakeholders such as probation officers, courts, and children and family services," said Dan Edwards, president of Evidence-Based Associates, one of DJJ's regional service coordination companies charged with implementing MST.

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“MST has proven itself effective time and again, because it targets the known causes of delinquency – family relations, peer relations, school performance, and community factors,” said Valerie Boykin, DJJ’s deputy director of community programs. “One of our key goals as we continue to transform our agency is to keep court-involved youth in their communities, near family support whenever possible, and out of an institutional setting. MST will play a major part in making this happen.”

Reform initiatives such as MST are being funded through reinvestment of funds made available through the downsizing of DJJ’s large correctional facilities, including the closing earlier this year of Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center in Powhatan County. The population of incarcerated youth has dropped significantly in recent years, reducing DJJ’s need for correctional centers.

DJJ began a major transformation three years ago using research and data to introduce new practices and programs that have proven to provide better outcomes for youth. The transformation includes the development of a continuum of evidence-based services across Virginia for youth who have been in the court system.

“As statewide program manager,” said Stinnett, “I serve as the project director for the development of the service continuum and manage the contractual relationship with the regional service coordina-

tion companies that are developing the service continuum through sub-contracted programs and services. I have been working closely with them over the last year to identify service gaps and to select quality services and providers.”

MST became available in the Rockbridge area through DJJ’s Waynesboro office on Oct. 1. A total of five positions were added to the office – four therapists and one supervisor – to comprise an MST team to serve this region.

“It’s exciting that it’s available here,” said Samantha Emore Higgins, supervisor of juvenile probation for the Rockbridge area courts. “We have been limited in resources and services. This is a great addition to our ability to serve court-involved kids – those who are on probation or parole in our area. It’s given us another tool to prevent incarceration. It adds another layer to our preventative services –

preventing children from being removed from the community.”

MST has not yet been used here, though she expects that to happen very soon. “We’re in the process of evaluating our cases to see which ones are appropriate for this,” she explained. “Youth who could benefit might include those who have had problems with truancy, running away or have been charged with felonies. We may have tried everything from mentoring to outpatient services to counseling, and the services have not worked. So, this is the next level.”

With MST, said Higgins, who also serves as president of the Virginia Juvenile Justice Association, “Everyone collaborates as a team. The focus is on at-risk behaviors. A whole team comes into the home and works with the youth and parents. It’s evidence-based – research backs it up.”

She added, “This is new to us. We’re very excited to have another resource.”