



WHAT'S WORKING

A Message From DJJ Director Andy Block

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How CSU 23A Is Doing More With Less

Creative Diversion Methods Result In Fewer Kids In Detention, More Staff To Help With Mental Health

It was one of the most daunting challenges Lloyd Merchant had ever been handed in his 15 years of DJJ experience: Figure out a way to reduce the spiraling costs of keeping increasing numbers of youth in detention in the Roanoke Valley Juvenile Detention Center (RVDJC), thus benefiting the community and the Roanoke City budget.

It didn't take him long to grasp the scope of the problem: Whereas other jurisdictions were paying between \$10,000 and \$25,000 a month to house youth in detention centers, the Roanoke City bill had hit \$130,000 at its peak for the month of August.

CSU 23A–Roanoke's Probation and Parole Supervisor knew that whatever the solution would be, it would require creative, radical ideas that would reduce the amount of time youth were spending in detention while getting the budget to a manageable level.

He started by asking City of Roanoke Probation Officer Jim Harper about a successful program he had been running that dealt specifically with juvenile drug dealers. The program, paid for with a special grant, provided services to these juveniles that kept them busy, off the streets, away from drugs, and out of detention.

Inspired by the results Harper was getting, Merchant decided to implement a similar effort, dedicated not just to drug dealers but to all youth currently in detention in the RVJDC. To help him, he recruited City of Roanoke Detention Review Specialist Tyrone Chavers.

Chavers, a city employee for about two years, jumped right in by creating a Secure Detention Alternative Summary, a five-page document complete with a full assessment instrument, a four-level set of supervision



Above, from left: Acting CSU 23A Director Carolyn Minix, Probation Officer Jim Harper and City of Roanoke Detention Review Specialist Tyrone Chavers inspect items contained in the "Treasure Chest," a collection of lower-level incentives. Below, from left: Minix, Chavers, Probation Officer Christopher Roberts and Probation and Parole Supervisor Lloyd Merchant display higher level incentives in what Roberts calls "The Store" where kids who have earned the privilege can "shop."





Above, from left: City of Roanoke Detention Review Specialist Tyrone Chavers; Acting CSU 23A Director Carolyn Minix; Probation and Parole Supervisor Lloyd Merchant; Probation Officer Jim Harper, and Probation Officer Christopher Roberts. Right: Roberts displays one of the movie passes used as one of the higher-end incentives for youth who satisfactorily complete the required steps of the program. The pass is mounted in a card printed with a note from the CSU 23A staff.

guidelines, and a contract for the juvenile to sign saying that he/she will adhere to the guidelines to be able to earn a series of incentives.

Probation Officer Christopher Roberts was tasked with deciding what those tangible incentives would be. “Incentives had been offered inconsistently in the past,” Roberts says. “What we put together was a much more formal set of incentives in which juveniles can earn items of increasing value as they progress through the probation period.” The first incentive: release back into the community. Others range from simple oral praise and certificates to items with tangible value, such as gift cards, candy bars and passes to movies. These incentives will be available to youth currently on probation and those released back into the community.

With the plan in place, the team began implementing the program late last year. When the grant that had funded Harper’s City of Roanoke position expired in April, Merchant promptly brought him to the DJJ team to assist with the program.

The results of the program have been spectacular, beyond even Merchant’s and Acting CSU Director Carolyn Minix’s expectations. Chavers estimates that an average of about 20 kids on any given day were in detention when the program started. With successful diversions and program placements, the average got down to a low of seven. Chavers estimates that about 300 kids have been served since the program began.

Consider the case of a youth that was detained on a very

serious charge. Chavers’ Secure Detention Alternative Summary was used to get a better understanding of any potential safety concern for the community and the youth. The assessment suggested that he get therapy to address Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He also participated in intensive substance abuse treatment, as well as grief counseling. Upon his release, he was able to begin public school and return to working evenings and weekends with his father’s business. All reports indicate that he is doing well.

Another youth with a felony charge was released from detention and placed on GPS monitoring with the CSU. He was placed in a summer volunteer internship with the Veteran Affairs hospital. The CSU is doing a social history investigation while he continues to be monitored, and stays in touch with his family and his school weekly.

The monthly bill has been cut to about \$80,000 a month, bringing the program about \$55,000 under budget. With the savings, the CSU is now able to fulfill DJJ’s mental health initiative on its own by hiring a mental health specialist to its staff, which will further help to get youth needing this service the care they need in a timely manner instead of having them wait in the detention facility.

“I can’t express how proud I am of the team here in Roanoke for accepting this difficult challenge and producing what already is a profound and positive change for the kids in our community,” Minix says.