Georgia’s Juvenile Justice System Applies New Framework to Modify Youth Behavior Trends

By Miguel Fernandez and Denise McClain

Since its implementation in 2005, the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice’s (DJJ) Behavior Management System had been employing a token economy system using a point card that primarily focused on negative consequences with little or no positive reinforcement. Youths were rewarded for positive behavior with points that were intended to be used to purchase snack food and hygiene items. Instead, youths were found to be gambling, bartering, and hoarding the food and hygiene items purchased with their points. Point cards were easily manipulated by youths, tracking of points was cumbersome and the system did not have clearly defined parameters for earning points. There was no consistency across the system for giving or maintaining points. Youths maintained their own point cards and were often given points just for showing up to programs, but with no real performance expectations or requirements for meeting educational or program goals.

DJJ leadership knew that this system resulted in power struggles between youths and staff. The agency leadership sought to change the dialogue and the climate within DJJ facilities. Through the support of an Institute of Education Science grant — and under the leadership of Kristine Jolivet, Ph.D., at Georgia State University — DJJ Commissioner Avery D. Niles signed a policy for the agency to implement positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) in 2013. PBIS is an evidence-based framework that uses a three-tiered system of support to lay out clear behavior expectations for youths. The framework teaches, models and reinforces the expected behaviors. The PBIS system uses data to inform facilities where changes need to occur to improve youth behavior and outcomes. That innovative framework, authorized by Niles, would soon designate Georgia as a national leader in PBIS implementation in secure juvenile justice settings.

A New Venture

Georgia was already gearing up for the roll-out of its new juvenile justice reform law, effective Jan. 1, 2014, with solid backing from Gov. Nathan Deal. But first, DJJ would embark on a venture no other state had undertaken by becoming the first juvenile justice agency in the nation to voluntarily implement facility-wide positive behavior interventions and supports (FW-PBIS). The majority of juvenile justice agencies implementing PBIS have done so under the direction of an outside entity requiring PBIS as part of a negotiated agreement.

Although it was clear that a new approach to behavior management was needed in DJJ secure facilities, the idea was not well-received at first by all facility leadership, staff or youths. Initial feedback suggested that youths might cause group disturbances if their amassed supplies of snacks were withdrawn and replaced with alternate reinforcements such as additional phone calls, extra visits with family and participation in extracurricular activities as rewards for appropriate behavior. However, when youths were asked to be a part of the development of their facility plans, they quickly bought into the new plan.

For implementation to be successful, it would require facilitywide participation by all disciplines. DJJ has its own school system that was recently renamed the Georgia Preparatory Academy. It is the state’s 181st school district, and the DJJ commissioner serves as superintendent. DJJ partnered with the public school system during its implementation of PBIS in public school districts and alternative schools as a means to improve school climate.

Statewide, DJJ has 27 secure facilities — which translate into 27 different PBIS plans. That is the beauty of working within the PBIS framework; each facility had the opportunity to create its own plan, making local buy-in more likely and commitment from stakeholders even stronger. Beginning in October 2012, each facility had the flexibility to create its own unique plan by developing a matrix to outline behavior expectations for all areas of the facility and developing a distinctive facility logo or tagline, as long as leaders stuck to the PBIS framework. DJJ facility staff learned that PBIS are not a program, but rather a framework where facility-level data and individual youth-level data are now used to guide decision-making for appropriate interventions for youths who require additional supports to succeed. In addition to implementation, staff needed tools for identifying which youths needed additional supports, and for ascertaining the appropriate supports to put in place.

Using Data to Make Interventions

PBIS are a prevention model based on a three-tiered system where the majority of youths in DJJ facilities are on the universal tier, and require
no additional interventions or supports in order to be successful in their secure placement. Approximately 10 to 15 percent of DJJ youths are on the secondary tier, and require some additional supports in order to be pushed back down to the universal tier. The final 5 to 10 percent of youths in DJJ facilities require tertiary tier supports.

Agency leadership developed a transition team and a focus team to review youths needing additional supports. The most important element of the transition team is that it is the decision-making team for behavior management in each facility, and uses data to make recommended interventions, youths’ schedule changes or other changes impacting the youths’ behavior. The first year of PBIS implementation at DJJ has improved youths’ behavior and created a more positive culture for both youths and staff, while supporting the agency’s mission of operating safe and secure facilities.

Radar Reports and Data Dashboards

“Radar reports” were developed to provide data for the transition and focus teams about the level of behavior problems experienced by youths and the length of time the problems are experienced. All DJJ secure facilities now have access to a “data dashboard” that provides facility-specific data identifying where and when incidents are occurring. The dashboard provides information on trends or patterns that help staff make adjustments to prevent continued behavior incidents. The FW-PBIS dashboard is the first-known, data-based tool freely accessible for FW-PBIS leadership team decision-making.

Leading the Culture Change

Each facility director was asked to identify a team leader and a co-leader. It was the first time the agency allowed the implementation of this big of a project to be guided by staff and not directed by the Central Office. At their initial training, the team leader and co-leader were instructed to go back and recruit a team to work with them to develop their facility plan. They were required to train all facility staff on the PBIS framework and ensure they had a sustainability plan that included training for any new staff on the PBIS model. They were also required to train the youths. The PBIS leadership team would be responsible for leading the culture change in their facility. This would mean a lot of teaching, modeling and reinforcing the expected behaviors.

Initial team leader training was held with Jolivet on the PBIS model. Participants were encouraged to be creative in developing their FW-PBIS plans. Jolivet, along with the state-level steering committee, worked with each team to prepare them for full implementation of PBIS using a team implementation checklist. To ensure implementation fidelity in all DJJ facilities, Jolivet, along with DJJ PBIS liaisons, conducted an initial fidelity review in December 2012, and has continued quarterly reviews at each facility using the fidelity evaluation tool (FET). Jolivet reported that the FET score results indicated a high level of fidelity with the implementation of PBIS in a number of facilities. The most recent FET reviews yielded 12 of 27 facilities meeting fidelity, with at least two of those maintaining fidelity for the past nine months. As the department implemented PBIS, the following variables were considered:

- Ways to reinforce staff who appropriately teach, model and reinforce expected behaviors needed to be identified.

The Tier II Committee comprised of Central Office and facility staff was created to review existing Tier II interventions, identify decision-making processes and to add more evidence-based interventions. DJJ implemented positive behavior agreements and looked at check-in and check-out as added Tier II interventions. The next step will constitute a Tier III Committee to address the small percentage of youths needing intensive and comprehensive interventions. DJJ is fully adopting the PBIS framework and expects all facilities to be meeting implementation fidelity in the very near future.

National Initiatives

In 2013, agency leaders were invited to share the Georgia PBIS implementation story at the Teacher Educators for Children with Behavioral Disorders national conference in Arizona. They have been highlighted in national initiatives with the American Institute of Research, National Technical Center on Delinquent and At-Risk Youth, and webinars sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education. In fall 2014, Georgia juvenile justice leaders, along with two DJJ PBIS team leaders, will also be presenters at the PBIS Forum in Chicago. Georgia presenters will share their administrative and team leader perspectives; highlight aspects of their FW-PBIS plans; and discuss the role PBIS plays in strengthening safety and security. The PBIS Forum in Chicago is hosted by the National Technical Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

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