

Families Behind Bars

CLOSE to Home Initiative Provides Families of Inmates With Visitation Opportunities

By Jill A. Ames

The Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS), the juvenile correctional system for the state of Ohio, is statutorily mandated to confine felony offenders — age 10 to 21 — who have been adjudicated and committed by one of Ohio’s 88 county juvenile courts. During their stay with DYS, the youths are engaged in programming designed to address their criminological and behavioral needs. Each of the DYS facilities also operates a year-round school that offers general curriculum, as well as vocational opportunities.

Over the past several years, multiple reentry initiatives were introduced at DYS, focusing on family engagement, mentoring and volunteer services. Family engagement is an important goal as strengthened family connections better prepare youths for their return to the community upon release (most return home to family members), and also reduce repeat offenses. DYS continues to prioritize family engagement through the CLOSE (Connecting Loved Ones Sooner than Expected) to Home initiative. Initially introduced as a grant-funded program, CLOSE to Home allows DYS to provide family members struggling with reliable transportation a way to visit incarcerated children via community-based vendors. This transportation is provided with no out-of-pocket costs for the families.



Photo courtesy Ohio Department of Youth Services

Ms. Pat from Akron travels to see her nephew through the Ohio Department of Youth Services’ transportation program.

Within each of the five parole districts in the state of Ohio, one senior juvenile parole officer (SJPO) is designated to arrange a cadre of bus vendors, coordinate reservations with families and schedule quarterly bus trips to facilities. Either via mail or hand-delivery by a juvenile parole officer, a flyer is provided to families with pick-up locations, scheduled trip dates and contact information to make reservations. The facility staff members are also provided with the same flyers to coordinate visitation opportunities between the families and youths.

To request reservations for the scheduled trips, parents can simply call the respective SJPO, who then completes the reservation list and coordinates the trip through the vendor. Many SJPOs (or designees) meet at trip pick-up locations to greet the families at the time of departure, and con-

tinually maintain a good working relationship with the vendors. During the designated trips, the vendors take the passengers to the facility, and return at the end of the visitation hours to ensure the family members are able to return home safely.

Feedback from families has been positive and encouraging. Many are so grateful for the opportunity to have at least one visit a month with their incarcerated family member. SJPOs frequently receive positive feedback and, in turn, share it with staff. In fiscal 2015, DYS provided 69 trips throughout the state, transporting a total of 578 passengers.

When asked what the bus trips mean to her, Sonya from Cleveland stated, “The trips allow me monthly visits with my grandson, which helps to improve his behavior in the facility, and gives him something to look forward to.” This initiative provides great satisfaction for everyone involved. Family, youths and staff all play a part in providing greater preparation for a youth’s successful reentry.



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