

September 2015
Path to Safer Communities



A Youth from Circleville JCF talks with an Admission Counselor at Hocking College Last Month

Over the last 18 months, we have been focused on the Path to Safer Facilities, increasing meaningful activities, holding youth accountable for their actions, and reducing youth violence. Now we are extending the path to support safer communities. We expect youth to do well with us during their stay at DYS, making the most of their time and fully engaging in quality education, treatment, and programming. However, we must have a long-term vision of preparing youth for a lifetime of success through heightened reentry efforts.

The youth population at DYS has changed: the average daily facility population has decreased from 1,735 youth in 2008 to an average of 460 today, and the parole population has gone from 1,500 in 2008 to about 330 youth today. While we celebrate the reforms that have resulted in these declines, we also recognize that we must adjust and be flexible to meet the needs of this smaller, but higher-need, population.

Our work begins as soon as youth enter our facilities. Beginning day one, we must help youth think about their future and together build plans for success. Along with family members and community partners, we must identify the barriers that youth returning home from a DYS facility face, as well as the best ways to remove those barriers.

We are tasked with instilling hope and shaping these young lives into adults who contribute to the community. Often, I tell our youth, “Where you are does not define who you are or what you can become.” We must help youth take the next step toward becoming their best by providing opportunities for youth to begin work and school, acquire essential life skills, and save money before they leave our care.

Our one-year recidivism rate, which includes youth who have returned to DYS or have been incarcerated in the adult system, is 24.7% (youth released in 2013). Our three-year rate is 47.2% (youth released in 2011). While these rates have trended downward over the years, there is more work to be done. We are currently conducting a review of all of our practices related to reentry planning and aftercare –the support and supervision provided when youth return home. The analysis will help ensure best practices for:

- Successful reintegration of youth back to their families and communities
- Educational progress and advancement as well as job training
- Life skills development, including self-control and critical problem-solving skills
- Positive and healthy relationships, especially with family members
- Stable housing
- Steady employment
- Management/resolution of mental health and substance abuse challenges

On a related note, in November, Ohio Supreme Court Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor, Franklin County Juvenile Court Judge Elizabeth Gill, Representative Dorothy Pelanda, Deborah Herubin with the Governor's Office, and I will be participating in the Council for State Governments Justice Center's 50-state forum to help key policymakers improve efforts to reduce recidivism and other outcomes for youth in contact with the juvenile justice system. We look forward to sharing in the exchange of ideas, staying on the cutting edge, and being the best possible agency for the youth we serve. Stay tuned for more on what we share, learn, and implement.