

Stepping Forward, Stepping Back:

The Alaska DJJ Copes and Succeeds With Change

By Tony Newman

Whenever Alaska's Juvenile Justice Director Steve McComb attends a meeting or conference out of state, he is always inundated with compliments. Perhaps his admirers have visited one of the state's modern, bright youth facilities and been impressed with the responsive programming. Perhaps they have worked with a national researcher and heard of Alaska's experiences in implementing a new assessment tool. Or perhaps they have learned that Alaska is at the forefront of any number of efforts — reducing disproportionate minority contact, for example — and want to hear how Alaska has been able to jump on the initiative so quickly and address it so well. "It's both humbling and flattering," McComb said. "And it makes me wonder if Alaska might have the best juvenile justice system in the country."

The last few years have been a time of particularly dramatic change and recognition for the agency. An alphabet soup of new programs and tools — the YLS, DAI, PbS, ART and others — have all been implemented within the past four years. The Transitional Services Unit, one of the innovative programs at Anchorage's McLaughlin Youth Center, has been called a promising practice in reentry services by the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The agency has rewritten its *Policy and Procedure Manual for Field Probation Services*, expanded mental health services to juveniles and stepped up its services to victims — all while continuing to cultivate and improve relationships with its state juvenile justice advisory board and other community partners.

To be sure, not all of these initiatives and developments have come easy. The agency has learned much about communication, adaptability and leadership that can be instructive to other agencies seeking to improve the way they do business.

A Position of Strength

Unlike many jurisdictions, the Division of Juvenile Justice has not been forced to make these changes against its will. No legislative finding or consent decree found the division to be mistreating youths or failing in its mission. Instead, the changes can be attributed to energetic leadership and an adaptable, capable staff that champions excellence and holds as core values responsiveness, accountability and objective decision-making.

According to McComb, the agency's short history and small, integrated structure have helped reinforce these core values. DJJ was founded just nine years ago, when it was separated from the much larger Division of Family and Youth Services and became part of the Department of Health and Social Services. The change was made primarily to better meet the needs of clients and the public, but it also boosted staff ownership in and identification with the agency and improved motivation and initiative within its ranks. As an independent agency, the new DJJ had the freedom to do its own strategic planning, choose its own performance measures and determine its own communication style.

"One thing we immediately did, and that continues to this day, was create

a number of avenues for communication," McComb said. One innovation was to establish a monthly teleconference in which randomly selected staff from around the state speak with the agency's top three administrators about whatever topics concern them.

Another systemic advantage of Alaska's juvenile division is that it is integrated, with juvenile intake, probation, detention facilities, secure treatment programs and aftercare all administered by one agency. Although Alaska's geographic isolation and size (the state is larger than Texas, California and Montana combined) pose significant challenges, the fact that facility superintendents and probation officers work for the same agency, occupy the same buildings and share the same supervisors contributes to communication and relationships across the various components and builds a team-like atmosphere.

The "System Improvement" Effort

Two factors helped set the stage for DJJ to launch its multifaceted system-improvement effort in early 2003. First, a federal appropriation allowed the agency to implement a new and comprehensive juvenile offender management information system that had the potential to dramatically increase the statistical information available concerning youths and their contact with the juvenile justice system. Second, new and emerging agency leaders were determined that objective assessment instruments or quality-assured processes be employed at each decision point in the juvenile

process to help ensure that these decisions were sensible, defensible and based on sound practice.

The first major system-improvement effort was the adoption of a new detention assessment instrument (DAI) to examine a juvenile's immediate and past delinquency history. Based initially on a similar tool adopted in Virginia, it was refined to reflect Alaskan statutes and experience. Probation staff completed a paper version of the instrument for the first year, then it was integrated into the juvenile database, which allowed for automatic completion and required virtually no extra work by staff. Nevertheless, reaction to the tool by line staff was highly charged and negative.

According to Walter Evans, a regional juvenile probation supervisor, introduction of the detention assessment instrument posed problems because staff were never quite sure of its purpose. Was it implemented to reduce the use of detention? Was its purpose to demonstrate the need for additional, or nonsecure, detention resources? Or was it intended to ensure objectivity when making detention decisions, regardless of whether it increased or decreased detention numbers?

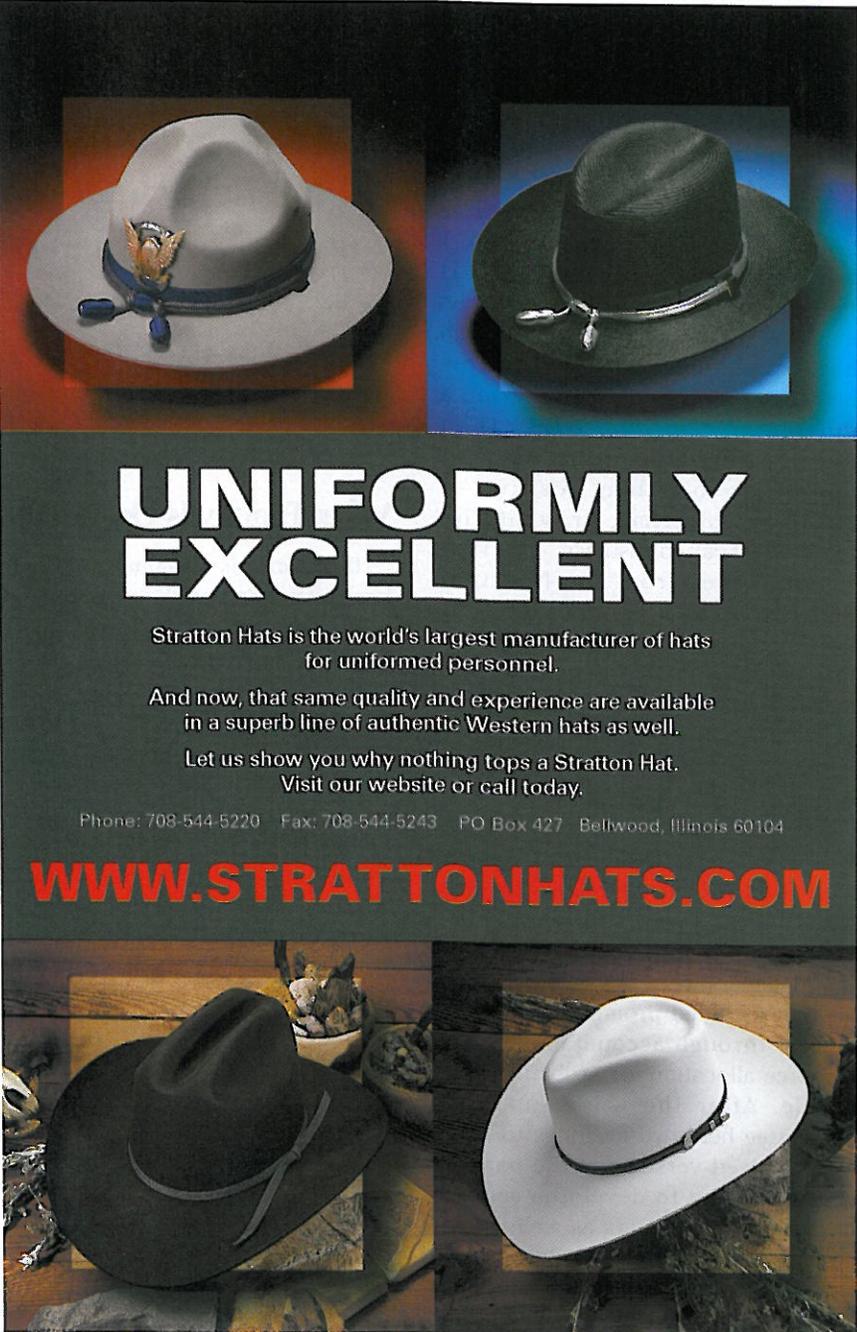
"The experience demonstrated that we could do a better job of explaining the need for such an instrument, work more closely with staff to help them see the potential benefits of the tool, and reach better consensus and buy-in from staff at all levels before proceeding with such a change," Evans said.

The next major system improvement effort was the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory, or YLS. While there was widespread agreement among staff that the agency's old, outmoded risk/needs instrument needed to be replaced, the point in the decision-making process at which it would be used was debated. Agency leadership was determined that the tool be used as early in the intake process as possible based on the claim of the YLS publishers that the tool could be useful at "all phases of the judicial decision-making process."¹ However, use of the tool as a means to determine a youth's appropriateness for formal case pro-

cessing was problematic for a number of reasons — it took too long to perform; it prompted tensions with parents and attorneys; and it could not be thoroughly scored prior to adjudication. Several months later, use of the YLS was pushed back to the post-adjudication stage and the agency began looking for a screening tool that would work better at the intake stage. "This experience taught us that there's no shame in revisiting an early decision and changing course based on the facts and experiences of line staff," McComb said.

Other setbacks accompanied the agency's successes. An attempt to implement the highly regarded Functional Family Therapy program through a partnership with a non-profit mental health services provider fizzled because its target recipients — youths being released from long-term secure treatment — did not have the family support necessary for the program to succeed. Moreover, the therapeutic model was not fully embraced by the service provider. Attempts to introduce the Aggression Replacement Training

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As a practical matter, if a health department or CBO approaches a system or facility and asks to implement an HIV/STD prevention intervention, system directors and facility administrators should not hesitate to ask where the intervention stands in terms of the "tiers of evidence." If the department or organization does not know, the director or administrator should suggest it go back and determine its tier position so that the system or facility can make a more informed decision about whether the program is going to be valuable. By the same token, if a facility or system has a great idea to provide HIV/STD interventions in its setting, it should contact the local health department and public health and/or criminal justice departments at a local university to get the evidence-based process started from the beginning.

What happens in the community affects what happens inside; what happens inside affects the community when individuals reenter from correc-

tions. Knowing how to effectively and efficiently provide HIV/STD services that have a real impact on the community is simply a part of good management, informed by good science.

ENDNOTES

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2007a. *Updated compendium of evidence-based interventions*. Washington, D.C.: CDC. Available at www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/research/prs/evidence-based-interventions.htm.

² Ibid.

³ Stinchcomb, J. 2001. Using logic models to focus evaluation efforts: Translating operational theories into practical measures. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 33(2):47-65.

⁴ DEBI information and the description of the VOICES/VOCES program are based on the Diffusion of Effective Behavioral Interventions project (DEBI) Web site at www.effectiveinterventions.org.

⁵ CDC. 2007a.

⁶ CDC. 2007b. Project Start. Washington, D.C.: CDC. Available at www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/research/projectSTART/index.htm.

⁷ Williams, Samantha. 2007. Addressing sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in the correctional setting. Presentation at the ACA 2007 Winter Conference, 20-24 January in Tampa, Fla.

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curriculum in juvenile facilities met with strong resistance because of the program's intensive quality assurance and adherence expectations. Ultimately, the training succeeded through steady insistence that quality assurance and oversight could not be negotiated. Another system improvement initiative, performance-based standards, also has succeeded because staff understand this same expectation.

All of these experiences have educated the agency on ways that it could improve its approach to any system improvement, according to Karen Forrest, deputy director of programs and administration. "I think we would approach any new initiative in a much different way in the future," she said. "Among the lessons learned are that we can never communicate too much, that we need to involve

line staff at all phases of the planning, that we must have realistic expectations for implementation, and that we should have our quality assurance and evaluation plan set up right from the beginning."

The Future

Nevertheless, staff at the agency should not expect to rest on their laurels anytime soon. McComb said that while he believes the agency is one of the best in the country, he wants to see additional system improvements under his watch. "We still have work to do in ensuring that every youth is being properly assessed, whether for substance abuse needs, mental health condition or risk of re-offending. We also need to do better at following through on our mission to build youth competencies, such as job skills, and to involve families at all stages.

"Once we can say we've done these things, then I'll be able to say

with complete confidence that yes, we do indeed have the best juvenile justice system in the country," McComb said.

ENDNOTE

¹ Hoge, R.D. and D.A. Andrews. 2003. *Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI) user's manual*. North Tonawanda, N.Y.: Multi-Health Systems Inc.

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