

Kevin Shepherd:

Good day everyone. My name is Kevin Shepherd and I am the project manager for the Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators. I want to welcome you to Reentry Week, and I want to welcome you to our webinar. For those of you who might be new to CJJA, we're a national nonprofit organization formed in 1994 to improve juvenile justice systems, local secure correctional and residential facilities, and programs with the ultimate goal of improving long-term outcomes for youth and families.

Kevin Shepherd:

CJJA represents the juvenile justice system CEOs in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and major metropolitan counties across the country. Next slide please. Please understand the following presentation was prepared under cooperative agreement number 2020-CZ-BX-K002 from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice.

Kevin Shepherd:

The opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this presentation are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the US Department of Justice. Our project today has been brought together by the Bureau of Justice Administration, the National Reentry Resource Center, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the American Institutes for Research.

Kevin Shepherd:

Please join me in welcoming our presenters. First is Mike Dempsey. Mike is the executive director of CJJA. Mike previously served as executive director of the Indiana Department of Corrections Division of Youth Services from 2009 to 2015. Mike holds a bachelor of science degree in public administration and criminal justice.

Kevin Shepherd:

April Graham is the program director for the office of community programs within Utah's Division of Juvenile Justice Services. April has 22 years of experience with juvenile justice service. She holds a master's degree, from University of Utah in social work and a licensed clinical social worker.

Kevin Shepherd:

Ms. Tasha Hunt is the deputy director of Juvenile Probation Services for the state of Connecticut Judicial Branch Court Support Services Division. Ms. Hunt is responsible for the management and operations of 12 juvenile probation offices across Connecticut. She earned a bachelor of science degree in sociology, with a concentration in criminology and criminal justice, and a master of science degree in education from Southern Connecticut State University. She is also an adjunct professor at the University of New Haven in the Henry C. Lee College of Criminal Justice and Forensic Science.

Kevin Shepherd:

Ellyn Toney serves as chief of operations for the Louisiana Office of Juvenile Justice, where she supervises continuous quality improvement services, compliance accreditation, investigative services, policy development, safety, grants management, and the agency's data warehouse. She holds a bachelor's degree in business management and has 31 years of experience in the field of corrections management.

Kevin Shepherd:

Thank you. Before we get to the content of our presentation, I want to ask Mike to take a moment and recognize juvenile justice leadership for their quick reaction to COVID.

Mike Dempsey:

Thank you Kevin. Good afternoon everyone, I'd like to take a moment to thank all of you for joining us on the webinar today and taking the time out of your busy schedules, particularly during the pandemic and the continuing efforts that we're all putting forward. To make sure that we're keeping our staff and youth safe in our facilities, and everyone under our care.

Mike Dempsey:

So I want to thank you all for taking time out of your busy days to join us. And I want to thank the juvenile justice system leaders all across the country, from the federal, state, and local jurisdiction level. I happen to believe that the quick response of the system leaders helped to prevent, and to reduce the amount of exposure and the rates of those exposures within our juvenile facilities all across the country.

Mike Dempsey:

I think that the initial response of the juvenile justice system leaders, initially seemed very aggressive, but was absolutely necessary in order to keep those risk levels reduced as much as possible. And I want to take a moment to thank, particularly thank, all of the direct care staff all across the country.

Mike Dempsey:

Both those in the field and those working in the facilities, for their incredible efforts and their dedication and their commitment to keeping all the youth and themselves safe during this crisis as well. An awful lot of additional burdens and pressures and stress was placed upon our direct care staff during the last year or so throughout the pandemic.

Mike Dempsey:

They took on additional roles and responsibilities – particularly as facilities were downsized and staffing levels are reduced to only essential staff only. That place has been an incredible burden on those direct care staff, and they need to be commended for their efforts and for their commitment and for their dedication to keeping everyone safe. So thank you all, and I'll turn it back over to Kevin.

Kevin Shepherd:

Thank you Mike. April's now going to discuss the initial response from Utah to supervision in the community, and how they adjusted to make sure youth were not returned to custody as a result of violations and certainly as a result of minor violations. April?

April Graham:

Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity to come and learn and share some of the things we learned during this time. One of the key points that we looked at as we started to see the country shut down in our state, was how we were going to continue to visit our kids in the community and how we were going to keep them connected to their families for those kids in residential care and in our secure facilities.

April Graham:

So one of the first things we did was to work towards increasing electronic visits, knowing that they could not be in person, that we wanted to have as many of those visits as possible that we can handle within our facility. The other thing that we did is we found there were a lot of families that didn't have cell phones or any way of connecting electronically.

April Graham:

So we offered devices, cell phone plans with data to be able to have those face-to-face virtual visits with their youth. The other thing that we worked on doing as we saw that the pandemic was not going to cease in just a few weeks, was try to continue home visits with adaptations. We worked with our community providers to adjust and really look at those kids at the end of their stays or transitioning home, how they could still do those things.

April Graham:

We worked with the families to call ahead, to check on symptoms or contacts they may have had just to be really careful about sending a kid home to someone who had had a contact. We also looked at visiting our youth in high risk situations, that did not typically have the same amount of supervision as our residential care kids.

April Graham:

We had to drive to their homes, make sure that they were there. We adapted this by having a continued visit through a window of a car, and then continued the visit on FaceTime or other virtual platforms, to be able to make sure that the home was in good shape and also be able to talk to the family. The other piece that we really looked at was this outreach and the strengthening stability factors.

April Graham:

We wanted to make sure that those kids were connected to community resources like mental health services, that they were continuing to get their med management as needed and their homes were safe. We also found that as the pandemic went on, we had a lot of families that lost their jobs and had basic needs that they were not being able to fulfill.

April Graham:

So we worked to do outreach and connect them to food banks. And for those families that could not get to the food banks, we brought food boxes to them. The other piece that we really wanted to work to make sure that our kids that went online virtually had a means of being able to do that. So we did provide Chromebooks to kids in areas where they were not able to get them from their schools.

April Graham:

We also worked to help to get them connected to breakfast and lunch, with the schools in their areas. And for the other kids that were not virtual and had paper packets, we made sure that those were delivered to them and helped to try to make sure that they understood and can get through them. We really saw this disconnect with the school piece as kids went virtual and the classrooms were closed.

April Graham:

The other part that I think our court system and our parole authority, they were pretty quick to go to virtual hearings. So kids were not being held up in facilities or in placements longer than they needed to

be. We also worked on assuring that those transition visits were happening for those kids in residential placements.

April Graham:

And they could continue to work towards going home and not being left in residential care longer than we needed. So those next hearings were set up on the hearing that they were in. Our presumptive lengths of stay in Utah, for our secure facilities, are three to six months, so it's pretty short. So we made sure that those parole hearings were set out for that three months in case that you've made all the things they needed to do to, to get out of the facility on time.

April Graham:

We switched over all of our child and family team meetings to a virtual platform. And if you have ever been to Utah, you know how large our state is geographically. This was very helpful for our families that lived in rural communities, that would have had to travel to the Wasatch Front, to visit their kids in a secure care.

April Graham:

The other piece that we really looked at is how to keep kids from coming back to a secure facility on technical violations. So, we re-looked at our violation and incentive response matrix, and made some adaptations. We made sure that all of our kids that were being looked at for revocations, back to secure care, were staffed with our assistant program directors.

April Graham:

That they were looking at accountability of the youth, if it was a situation where youth turned themselves in and came clean with whatever was going on, of course we were working to work through that with them and keep them in the community. We also had to look at the degree of violations. Of course, kids who had possible charges that were felony or aggravated offenses – those were the kids that we focused on bringing back in, leaving kids who had lesser violations out in the community. And of course, multiple violations and looking at just the trajectory of how they were working out in the community and what those things look like. We also had a lot of community providers that really stepped up, to help, to wrap services around these kids.

April Graham:

Some of them seeing them in person with some adaptations, while others were doing a lot of things electronically. We also tried to provide as many incentives as we could for kids. So if they were doing well, we're trying to extend home visits. We looked at their progress, and if we could we transitioned or paroled them early.

April Graham:

We have the option of being able to allow them to keep their cell phone after services ended. We actually gave Chromebooks out to kids as they left our care. And then we also try to provide activities for kids as things kind of opened back up.

Kevin Shepherd:

I know you were able to create an impressive opportunity for youth to participate in college level vocational training. Can you tell us a little more about that April?

April Graham:

Yeah. At the beginning of the pandemic, before things shut down, we looked at how we could reinvent some of our spaces that we had in our facilities to give kids more of an opportunity for vocational skills. So they could learn some of these things prior to coming out. As we went into the pandemic and things went on more virtually, we found there was an even bigger opportunity.

April Graham:

Because we could share some of those classroom spaces across multiple facilities. So we could have specific skills in each facility that have multiple kids across the six facilities we have in our state participate in one they were interested in, not just the one that was onsite to them. And because of that, this last legislative session, we also went back and worked to try to have some legislation done.

April Graham:

Which we did through House Bill 279, which created some opportunities to ensure that incarcerated youth statewide could do it in concurrent enrollment through Dixie State University. Last year we had some legislation that provided us an opportunity to work with kids until age 25. So we found that it was really important to try to create these spaces, so that youth could get post high school education.

Kevin Shepherd:

And April, is this something that you're going to continue post pandemic?

April Graham:

Yes, this is... We have a very small population in our secure settings, so it's really hard to have multiple things going on for a facility, because of the amount of kids that are there. But across the continuum or those spaces across the whole state, we'll be able to have some of those virtual classrooms to really link into some of these things that kids are interested in.

Kevin Shepherd:

Oh, very good. Thank you. In Connecticut, Tasha and her team quickly recognized that the youth in virtual education system did not all have the same needs. Can you tell us about that Tasha?

Tasha Hunt:

Yes, Kevin. Thank you for hosting this wonderful event and creating a space for us to share how we turn change into opportunity. Like other jurisdictions, the Judicial Branch Court Support Services Division was impacted by the challenges brought on by COVID-19. We found ourselves taking inventory of available resources, to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and quickly figured out ways to address our operational challenges.

Tasha Hunt:

But what about our ability to stay connected to our clients and their families struggling with this new norm? So we noticed that our clients they were struggling particularly with school engagement and compliance with supervision. And we know that research tells us, school disengagement can significantly

increase the likelihood of students dropping out of school, and engage in delinquent behaviors leading to arrest and court involvement.

Tasha Hunt:

So one of the things that we did was create a school disengagement process. Just so that we could develop and implement a more systematic approach to engaging and re-engaging probation clients. There was a shift to remote learning during the pandemic. Distinct roles were established for juvenile probation officers and supervisors – just related to how we identify students, how we approach relationship building, as well as collaboration with our clients, their families, schools, and providers. Juvenile probation supervisors throughout this process were responsible for forging and maintaining collaborative relationships with school administrators, really the key decision makers, and they were required to participate in system meetings to address the school disengagement.

Tasha Hunt:

So, throughout the protocol, probation officers had to identify someone at the school who was seen as a supportive role for the student. It's important to point out that the student had to identify who that person was, and what that person meant to them as far as a support. It could have been a school social worker, a guidance counselor, case manager, particularly someone who is able to work with students who have individualized education plans.

Tasha Hunt:

Maybe it was a favorite teacher, a coach, or administrator who knows the student well. Probation officers were also required to monitor any disruptions to the educational system, that may result in a change to the method of instruction. I'm sure other jurisdictions experience days when school was fully remote and days when school was on a hybrid model.

Tasha Hunt:

And so, probation officers were responsible for communicating with families to make sure that they understood where they can find the information about their child's education and how they can stay informed of any last-minute changes. Probation officers work directly with the school officials when it was necessary to assist clients and families.

Tasha Hunt:

Not only with staying aware of the changes, but also with ensuring that they had access to the necessary equipment and materials to participate in their educational program. So, for some of our kids that meant probation officers working with the school around how to purchase certain types of equipment to ensure that the student had access.

Tasha Hunt:

Be it, what's available through the school like a laptop. Does a family have Wi-Fi in order for the child to participate? And so probation officers and supervisors, they assisted with just building a bridge of communication between the school and the parents. And probation staff should be seen as a resource, where they could support the local education providers by not only helping them with the communication with the families and with clients.

Tasha Hunt:

But also to help them understand the court process and the role of juvenile probation, and some of the laws governing confidentiality within the system. Let's take a look at the next slide and the role of probation officers in this process. So although students are best served by a long-term plan of parental advocacy and engagement, it's important for the probation officer to be viewed by that child as a resource. A resource, not a replacement for the parent or the guardian.

Tasha Hunt:

Clients should feel supported by their probation officer and have a voice in their educational planning. And so probation officers were trained around how to have conversations with clients, not just about compliance, but about their educational goals. To ensure that their goals aligned with the probation case plan and so that they can support whatever that child's educational plan is.

Tasha Hunt:

And what appropriate probation officers were authorized to use graduated incentives to enhance motivation and promote achievement. And sometimes we know that our students are our probation clients. Oftentimes they may not have the basic needs in order to participate in their school program. Sometimes it may be a matter of them not having access to school uniforms, hygiene products, sneakers, a backpack, school supplies.

Tasha Hunt:

So it's important for probation officers to be in a position to recognize that as a barrier to attendance or participation, and to figure out ways to assist. And in Connecticut, probation officers have access to flexible funding that can assist in filling those gaps and eliminating those barriers. So as part of the probation officer's role in just advocating for clients, they're also responsible for making sure that our families understand their rights and what's available to them as far as advocacy for their children.

Tasha Hunt:

And so, part of the probation officer's role is to really work with the school, work with any contracted providers that we put in place or community providers that they are working with. Just to ensure that the child and the family sees that there is a supportive team wrapping around them and assisting them through this process.

Tasha Hunt:

In Connecticut, we also have access to legal advocacy when it's necessary for our family to access some type of formal advocacy. We have contracted educational support services through our programs that we can link families to. And we also have the ability to make sure that if kids are not on official supervision with the probation officer, but they have cases pending, that the probation officer is able to assist the family with what's available in their community. When there isn't an active supervision in place and particularly for post probation involvement.

Kevin Shepherd:

Thank you, that's awesome. I know you mentioned several opportunities to expand on technology and Mike, I know you had some thoughts on that as well, do you mind sharing?

Mike Dempsey:

Sure. Thanks Kevin. Yeah, just a couple of things coming to mind as Tasha was talking through some of the school initiatives that have occurred during the pandemic and it is difficult, and challenging is the pandemic has been. The fact is that it did provide us with opportunities to improve services, and it provided us with access to some additional resources that we wouldn't normally have had access to. And those resources, those opportunities have helped create what I would call new better practices.

Mike Dempsey:

Particularly around school and around reentry services to help ensure that youth are successful, once they transition back to the community. A couple of thoughts that I have are just the rapid expansion of technology and the use of Wi-Fi services inside juvenile facilities. That is something that has historically been very challenging particularly for jurisdictions all across the country, very challenging to establish Wi-Fi networks inside of the security juvenile facilities.

Mike Dempsey:

And in the pandemic clearly it has opened the door to help expand the use of that, and in doing that, it has really helped expand the use of educational service, virtual educational services within those secure facility education settings. It's also helped us just to expand the use of video visitation services and to enhance family engagement services.

Mike Dempsey:

It is extremely important, particularly when you're thinking about reentry and transitional services for youth it is incredibly important to make sure that we're doing all we can around family engagement. And making sure that the families, the parents, the guardians are actively engaged and involved in reentry planning.

Mike Dempsey:

And I think the additional use of technology within the secure facilities has done an incredible job of increasing family engagement strategies, which in turn will increase the success rate for reentry and transitional services of youth. Now, I've done an awful lot of traveling over the last six months, contrary to what most people have been able to do during the pandemic.

Mike Dempsey:

But it was important for CJA to continuously be actively engaged in facility operations and seeing what that was looking like and seeing what the results facilities were getting as they changed some of their operations, in order to meet the needs of the pandemic and keeping people safe. So I saw an awful lot of different responses operationally, and I was in a facility a couple of months ago.

Mike Dempsey:

And was witnessed to some of the positive changes that they were able to do around the use of technology, and being able to get youth engaged in secondary education. And in one facility I was actually talking to a young lady who had been in the facility for about six months, but was able to... During the pandemic, she was able to complete her high school education and get a diploma.

Mike Dempsey:

And then she was also able to enroll in secondary college level courses that she was taking virtually. And she was just about to be... She was transitioning into her release phase from the facility. But that she was incredibly excited by not only to being able to complete her high school education but, the work that she was able to do in regards to her college degree and being able to push that forward.

Mike Dempsey:

So to me, that was a very clear example of a positive outcome from a bad situation, right? We've taken this pandemic, but an awful lot of juvenile systems and facilities have been able to access resources to get better outcomes for youth who are entrusted to their care.

Kevin Shepherd:

Thank you Mike. I mean, that is quite a success story. So I think sometimes we overlook some of the good things that may have been created. So back to Tasha, we all know that youth were at home or throughout the pandemic, and they were participating in virtual schooling while they're at home. They're kind of cooped up throughout this pandemic.

Kevin Shepherd:

Can you talk to us a little bit about how you responded to technical violations that you were seeing from your youth?

Tasha Hunt:

Sure Kevin. One of the things I could share with you is that it really required us to get creative and think about the end game, which is just stability and long-term success. And so when probation officers were responding to non-compliance, they were required to exhaust our graduated responses in accordance with our graduated response policy, which combines graduated sanctions and incentives.

Tasha Hunt:

And so consideration was given to really the impact of the pandemic, and what that may do as far as changing behaviors and really how to attain a careful balance between promoting accountability and identifying services and alternative solutions to address non-compliance. And so at every stage of the decision-making process, consideration was given to public health risk versus the risk to public safety.

Tasha Hunt:

And so probation officers had to tap into their toolbox to use appropriate incentives and positive reinforcements to encourage and support positive behavioral change in compliance with the conditions of supervision. We ended up creating a new supervisor approval process, that was implemented for probation initiated requests for taken to custody orders.

Tasha Hunt:

Which also required the supervisor to get their manager's approval before seeking a judge's signature on a taken to custody order. And so all taken to custody orders that were signed were subject to a second judicial review by the chief administrative judge for juvenile matters, before admitting the youth to detention.

Tasha Hunt:

I can tell you that we did see a decline in the number of kids coming into our facilities. And we saw that we found ways to improve, how we use our graduated responses. And so while this practice was put in place as a result of the pandemic there are some lessons learned. And while we will lift certain portions of this practice, right now we are really looking at, as we return to some sense of normalcy, what are we seeing as far as detention, admissions, and requests for taken to custody orders?

Tasha Hunt:

And right now, we are seeing that the system has not changed greatly and that we're able to continue on with the spirit of this practice that was put in place as a result of the pandemic. So again there was an opportunity here for us to take this change and improve practice.

Kevin Shepherd:

Yeah. If you would Tasha, I know in our conversations that I found it very transparent, how your agency decided to engage your community and your stakeholders. If you would just please tell us how you did that.

Tasha Hunt:

Sure. Transparency and information sharing, they're critical to successful engagement and collaboration with stakeholders. Soon after the pandemic, we had to really think about how do we get the information out there. As we were going through our emergency planning, we had to figure out how do we ensure that the public, the public that we serve, that they're aware of how the court system is operating under the emergency orders. And, just for parents and our clients, for them to know where they stand with respect to court conditions, court hearings. And so the judicial branch developed a webpage devoted to COVID-19 updates, just to help the public navigate the changes. And I'm sure others experienced the same types of changes that were oftentimes driven by what was happening in the community as a result of the pandemic, quickly just responding to the needs.

Tasha Hunt:

One of the things that probation officers did immediately was to change their voicemail greetings, their email auto reply messages, and they had to frequently update the contact information for juvenile probation staff during and after regular business hours. So there were times that we were operating under a skeleton crew, but we were always able to ensure that staff were available to the clients and families that we serve.

Tasha Hunt:

And so when we talk about engagement strategies, one of the most important things that we could do is to stay connected to our families and to keep them informed of what's going on. Because we know that a lot of times they depend on communication through either email messages or through actual letters in the mail.

Tasha Hunt:

And because of this pandemic, we really did not have the luxury of waiting for some of those things to happen. And so the probation officer as a case manager, had to ensure that that information was communicated to our clients and families in a timely way. Another thing that the Judicial Branch CSSD Leadership Team, did on a weekly basis was to provide updates to the Connecticut state legislator, our

advocates for families and children, as well as other key stakeholders throughout this process, through virtual meetings and email correspondence. And although things have changed a bit, that was a structure that was in place before the pandemic. So it really served us well as a place where we could communicate information on a regular basis.

Tasha Hunt:

And we rely on stakeholders to get the word out to the public about what was happening. Another thing that the Leadership Team did, was participate in interviews with news agencies about the impact of COVID-19 on operations and client services. And so that was another way that we were able to ensure that the public was aware of all of the changes taking place as a result of this pandemic.

Tasha Hunt:

All of the requests that came in were all vetted by our external affairs, before there were any interviews conducted with reporters. But as we look back on just our level of communication, and as we look at what we're doing today, we see that that stakeholder engagement is still strong, it's still critical, and it is definitely something that will remain in place beyond the pandemic. Thank you.

Kevin Shepherd:

No, thank you Tasha. That's all...I mean, all of it is such good stuff. Mike, I know that you've long been a proponent of making sure that the public sees themselves as part of the solution. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Mike Dempsey:

Sure. Thanks Kevin. So I just want to take a minute to emphasize again the importance of communication, and how the pandemic has provided some opportunities around that particular issue and around I guess what I would classify more as agency collaboration and communication, right? So not just because a youth is in the juvenile justice system does not necessarily mean that, that kid is not going to need additional support and resources from other child welfare agencies.

Mike Dempsey:

Particularly once they've transitioned back to the community. And historically we have for whatever reason, agencies have always shut services off once youth enter the juvenile justice system. And I know a lot of work has been done over the last few years to try to align services so that we're getting better outcomes.

Mike Dempsey:

And that youth who are in the juvenile justice system can cross back over to those services from some of the other community-based child welfare systems. So the pandemic has clearly helped align some of the thinking and some of the responses between agencies as that happens. So that I think is an incredibly important outcome, and one that we absolutely have to make sure that we sustain once the pandemic is gone.

Mike Dempsey:

The reentry planning process is key to success of youth once they transition back into the community. Making sure that the services are aligned and in place to make sure that we have that continuity of care

throughout that transitional process so that there is no downtime, once a youth is back in the community. It's just incredibly important.

Mike Dempsey:

And I think that the pandemic has helped us to align those practices. It has helped us to pay more attention to that planning process and to actively engage the community in a way that keeps them involved. But it gets them involved in that transitional process, so that some of those community-based organizations and agencies are reaching out and developing a connection with the youth while they are still inside the facility.

Mike Dempsey:

So that when that transition does occur, it's seamless. That piece of it is the make or break point for the vast majority of youth as they go back into the community. That transition has to be seamless, they need to know who their contacts are. They need to establish a relationship with those other agencies, whatever, whoever their contact or service providers are.

Mike Dempsey:

And when we see that those relationships have been developed prior to the release and the connection has been made, I think we see that the outcomes for those youth are incredibly increased. So, I think just paying attention to that process, that planning process, and establishing those relationships and the connections from the get-go.

Mike Dempsey:

While the youth are still in our care within the facilities, will have a positive impact on the success of the reentry.

Kevin Shepherd:

Absolutely. Thank you Mike. So let me bring Ellyn into the conversation here. So we're all aware that the communities are in the process of opening back up and restrictions are beginning to ease. And we're starting to see many jurisdictions are opening in-person visitation back up. We all know that when youth receive visitors, they're more likely to demonstrate better behavior in the facilities.

Kevin Shepherd:

And they're also more likely to succeed once they return to the community. So Ellyn's going to talk to us a little bit about how Louisiana has recently opened back up their visitation, but also with an eye toward being able to furlough youth in the near future. And furloughing is an integral piece of reentry in Louisiana. So Ellyn?

Ellyn Toney:

Thanks Kevin. And hello everyone. It's a pleasure to be with you today. So Louisiana Office of Juvenile Justice began devising a plan to bring visitation back online as early as November of 2020. We thought at that point in time that we were on the verge of moving forward, however COVID numbers increased and Louisiana was moved back to phase 2A.

Ellyn Toney:

In the meantime though, the facility directors had developed a draft plan to bring visitation back online. And that was a plan that worked for their facility layout, their staffing numbers, et cetera. On March 11th of this year of 2021, Louisiana was finally able to move to phase three. And at that point, the draft visitation plans that were developed earlier in November were tweaked and then adopted.

Ellyn Toney:

And that plan was that only two visitors would be allowed per youth. The parent or guardian had to schedule the appointment in advance. The visitor would go through a temperature check and screening and must wear a mask the entire visit. And OJJ provided clean disposable masks for the visitors and the youth also had to wear a mask.

Ellyn Toney:

The visiting areas would be spaced out to allow for ample social distancing. And each facility, just due to size, varied on the number of visitors allowed per time slot and also available staff to supervise. So certain facilities had more visitors at one time than others just due to that one thing. And each facility had staff available then to properly sanitize the visitation area, between visitation appointments.

Ellyn Toney:

And let's look at the next slide to show how we implemented that plan. So the week after being brought into phase three, we began getting the message out. That was accomplished two ways. Our parent and guardian names and phone numbers were pulled from the agency's case management system. This information was loaded into the agency's emergency notification system.

Ellyn Toney:

And then we were able to do mass notification that was sent to parents by facility, with a message that visitation was resuming effective March 20th of 2021. And they were given the contact number of the person at the facility to call, to schedule the visit. And immediately following that, we had staff to also call each parent, to ensure they received and understood the message, and then we answered any questions they might have.

Ellyn Toney:

So calls started coming in and the visits were then scheduled, and facilities prepared the visitation area with appropriate distancing and sanitation. And then on March 20th of 2021, our visitation resumed for all of our OJJ secure facilities. And it was very successful. The parents were so excited to see their children, and many expressed shock as to how much they had grown.

Ellyn Toney:

We had had visitation via Zoom, but it did not compare to the parents seeing their children in person again. And OJJ contracts with group homes for non-secure youth placement and most of our group homes, were also able to begin visitation on that same weekend, utilizing the same guidelines that I mentioned earlier.

Ellyn Toney:

And there were a few that were experiencing some staffing issues still due to COVID and others that had had damage due to recent hurricanes and ice storms, and we're just getting back up and running. So

some of those weren't quite able to get visitation back up yet, but they're coming behind it. Majority were able to get visitation back online that same weekend however.

Ellyn Toney:

And then the next slide we'll talk about moving forward to furloughs. So right now the Office of Juvenile Justice is currently in active discussion as to how to proceed with furloughs. We know it won't look like what it did before COVID, at least not for now. Furloughs and home passes are vital to some of our youth being allowed to release or step down in custody.

Ellyn Toney:

Some judges will not modify these disposition until he or she receives a certain number of home passes or has one or two successful furloughs. And we've experienced that even with COVID right now. So we're going to monitor the numbers for the next month, and while we're developing a plan to select those youth who have done well, and are being delayed from stepping down or having their disposition modified due to not having a successful home pass or furlough.

Ellyn Toney:

And also we're going to identify those youth who are getting close to discharge. So those are going to be our priorities. We know there will also need to be a quarantine plan, based on CDC guidelines and the state guidelines and also who is to do so. So we're in the process of identifying those youth now and all those things are going to be considered moving forward.

Ellyn Toney:

And then as COVID numbers continue to decrease and we have to graduate back into the agency's usual furlough process using the policy's specific criteria. But even though we've not been able to provide furloughs or home passes, youth who meet the criteria have been allowed to step down from secure to non-secure.

Ellyn Toney:

And the agency has had a quarantine process in place for those youth who moved through the continuum. So we are looking forward to being able to get furloughs and home passes started very soon.

Kevin Shepherd:

Very good. Thank you Ellyn. So Mike and April, we're now going to finish up our presentation with some insights into potentially some of the positive outcomes that have been created during the pandemic and how, such an unforeseen circumstance has caused the juvenile justice system to examine their practices and rethink how they handle reentry efforts. April, I'll start with you.

April Graham:

Yes. Thank you Kevin. Yeah. Through a lot of challenges, we did see some bright spots in COVID. Our families often commented how it was nice for them to participate in hearings that they would not have participated in, because they would have had to drive hours to a facility to participate. And like I said before, our geographic area in Utah is quite large.

April Graham:

So you could have a family driving from as far as six hours away, or close into the community. So that tended to be a very big, bright spot for families that also helped with the visits at some of the programs or residential placements that kids were in. Families got to visit more frequently with the virtual face-to-face, versus just a phone call or a short visit on campus.

April Graham:

The other thing with the outreach services that we provided as kids were transitioned home, and schools shut down, and knowing that we had to have that extra supervision and providing the additional outreach to really make sure their basic needs were being met, created some trust with families that staff were out there to help them as much as possible.

April Graham:

That it wasn't just a check the box, or we weren't just trying to create this unit of supervision for kids, that we really wanted to see them succeed and have everything that they needed in place for that to happen. The therapists being able to use telehealth has been a really positive thing for a lot of youth.

April Graham:

As a lot of you may know, when kids move from programs to home or to other programs, oftentimes you have to change therapists and these kids have to really kind of develop all of these things they had already talked about with the previous therapist. With telehealth, they were able to keep the same therapist from start to end, which was huge for trust again, with the youth, and being very transparent and honest about what is going on.

April Graham:

And also with families that are working with those clinicians, there was a lot more trust and ability to have clear communication throughout that process. And then lastly, as we talked about before the opportunities provided for virtual learning in post high school situations, or concurrent enrollment seems to be something that we're really looking forward to, really maximizing across our state.

Kevin Shepherd:

Awesome. Thank you April. Those are all such really good points. So Mike, do you want to wrap us up with your thoughts?

Mike Dempsey:

Sure. Again, so just to finish it up, I think it's important for us. I know we're talking about reentry and some of the strategies that were developed through COVID that we feel had a positive impact on some of the reentry strategies and initiatives that were undertaken during the pandemic. I just want to remind everybody that what we do at facilities matters, right?

Mike Dempsey:

The culture, the atmosphere, the conditions of confinement, the incidents of violence that occur inside the facilities, all those things matter. And they matter in a way that absolutely impact success of youth as they reenter into the community. Relationships between the staff and the kids inside the facilities, absolutely matters as well.

Mike Dempsey:

What those relationships look like, feel like, they make a difference. And the pandemic provided us with an opportunity to change what those relationships look like and feel like in many facilities all across the country. By reducing the amount of support staff inside our facilities, it left those direct care staff in a position in which they had to fill in as educators, as teachers, as counselors, as mental health professionals.

Mike Dempsey:

And that put an awful lot of stress and burden on them, but at the same time and I also believe that it really did have a positive impact on building positive relationships between those direct care staff and the youth, in a way that we haven't been able to achieve before, right? Historically we have always taught our staff to keep that distance, and not to develop those relationships in a way that they really need to.

Mike Dempsey:

So that they can have that positive impact on youth development. We pushed them away from that. And over the last few years, we have really tried to change what that looks like and what that feels like for the kids and for the staff as well. And I think the pandemic has really helped us push that forward, in a way that is going to give us much better outcomes.

Mike Dempsey:

Those direct care staff throughout this pandemic had just had an incredible impact on the youth who are entrusted to their care. I've seen it all across the country and facilities I've been in, inside and out. And I just wanted to again, emphasize the importance of that. The importance of reentry starts in the facilities, right? It starts on day one, we've said that for decades now.

Mike Dempsey:

And that's absolutely true. And I think it's even more so true now than it has ever been, and is absolutely important for us to recognize that it's not just the planning piece that plays a role in success of reentry. It's what that relationship looks like between those direct care staff who were entrusted to work with those kids every single day.

Mike Dempsey:

And what that looks like and what that feels like, the tools that they are provided to understand some of the challenges that those kids are managing and dealing with every day. And how they respond to those types of incidents and behaviors of youth and giving them a better understanding of what those kids are going through, why they're behaving a certain way.

Mike Dempsey:

But that relationship is key in my mind to I guess what I would call the staff wellness influence, right? If our staff are well, if they're trained, if they have the skills to effectively work with the youth entrusted to their care, and respond to behaviors in a positive way, in a way that helps deescalate situations, in a way that improves the culture and the atmosphere of the facility.

Mike Dempsey:

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And in a way that reduces the use of restraint, reduces the use of isolation practices. Those things have a positive influence in the end on reentry, right? It has a positive influence on how well those youth are going to transition back into the community. With that...

Kevin Shepherd:

Thank you Mike, those are... Yes. Thank you. Those are such good points to wrap up our presentation, all outstanding points. And thank you too Ellyn and Tasha and April and for your time and being part of our presentation today. To see Reentry Week full schedule of events and links to resources, please visit the NRRC at www.nationalreentryresources.org, or join in the conversation by following #ReentryMatters, #ReentryWeek, #ReentryWeek21, or #YouthReentry2021.