

Promising Practices: Project SODA (Status Offender Diversion Alternatives)

Challenge

SODA is intended to prevent status offender behaviors such as running away from home, repeatedly disobeying the reasonable commands of parents and teachers, skipping school, etc. The desired result is to eliminate incarceration of non-criminal offenders and achieve a 50% reduction in status offender petitions.

Program Description

Over the past 22 years, SODA has been the only consistent provider of runaway and homeless youth services across Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

SODA provides individual, family, group, and positive youth activities to help develop skills that can be applied in many settings such as home, school, and community. Intervention services are offered that are time limited (typically do not exceed 90 days). SODA also accesses community resources to assist young people and their families.

Organizations working with families can link their clients with crisis services and emergency shelters. Close relationships with Probate Courts, the Family Independence Agency, Child Protective Services, intermediate school districts, county health departments, hospitals, prosecutors' offices, and police departments provide ready access for new clients to begin services and bridge gaps when developing treatment plans. Parents, youth, schools and agencies such as the Juvenile Court and the Family Independence Agency refer the volunteer participants. Services are available directly to youth and many community agencies.

Results

During fiscal year 2002, SODA provided direct services to more than 700 unduplicated youth and families. In 2002, services and client profiles included 709 referrals, 453 cases opened, and 649 initial assessments.

Analyzing follow-up questions at service completion, 90 days and 180 days after termination from treatment show the following:

- 96% were in a safe and stable living environment
- 83% reported that presenting problems were resolved or improved
- 89% had not run away from home
- 89% had avoided involvement with the juvenile justice system
- 65% learned a new skill while receiving services
- 82% said they would refer a friend to the program

Additional benefits of the SODA program include:

- Enabling youth and families to have immediate access to assistance in crisis situations; thereby, reducing at-risk encounters, runaway or abusive situations, and facilitating more efficient links to appropriate community services

- Empowering youth with greater access and awareness of community resources
- Providing all families the opportunity for crisis assistance, counseling, and shelter for their respective youth, regardless of income, or economic condition

Since the commencement of the SODA program, there has been an 89% reduction in the number of status offense petitions filed throughout the region. Reducing the number of status offender petitions in each of the past 22 years has resulted in a taxpayer savings estimated at \$6 million.

History of Promising Practice

Project SODA began as the result of a 1980 analysis. It indicated that the Upper Peninsula counties generally lacked adequate alternative programs to deal with youth and their families who were experiencing problems. Research conducted at that time showed that the Upper Peninsula, with a population of 333,000, processed more than twice as many youth through the court than did courts in comparable urban areas of the state. The types of offenses were also sharply different.

Upper Peninsula offenses usually involved property, status offenses, and liquor violations. In urban areas, more serious occurrences included acts of violence and serious property offenses. A higher percentage of youth in the U.P., despite minor offenses, were placed on official court supervision than in urban areas. Project SODA was launched in 1981 by Child and Family Services to specifically address these needs. By late 1997, all 15 Upper Peninsula counties were receiving some degree of services from SODA.

Target

Families & Youth (8 -17 year-old status offenders with or without active petition)

Organization

Child and Family Services of the Upper Peninsula, Inc.
1100 South Front Street
Marquette, MI 49855
(906) 228-4025
www.cfsup.org

Organization Description

Founded in 1919, Child and Family Services of the U.P. is a private, not-for-profit, non-sectarian social service agency serving multiple areas of the Upper Peninsula. The mission of CFS is to enhance the well-being of families and individuals by providing quality social service programming. CFS offers 16 programs in four areas:

1. Home-Based Services
2. School-Based Services
3. Child Welfare Services

4. Positive Youth Development Programs

In all cases, the agency's services are offered either at minimal or no cost to clients. The agency's policy is to not deny services to anyone due to their inability to pay.

Child and Family Services programs and services and their respective geographical service areas follow:

Home-Based Services

Wraparound – Marquette and Mackinac Counties

Families First – Houghton, Keewenaw, Baraga, Ontonagon, Iron, and Gogebic Counties

School-Based Services

School Success – Dickinson and Menominee Counties

Before and After School Program – Marquette County

Child Welfare Services

Adoption – Upper Peninsula

Counseling – Upper Peninsula

Head Start Counseling – Marquette and Alger Counties

Specialized Foster Care – Upper Peninsula

Parent Therapist Program – Marquette County

Access Visitation/Exchange Services – Upper Peninsula

Post Adoptive Support Services – Upper Peninsula

Positive Youth Development Programs

Better Futures – Marquette County

Intensive Mentoring Program – Ontonagon County

Strengthening Families Program – Marquette County

Status Offender Diversion Alternatives – Upper Peninsula

Supportive Housing for Youth Program – Chippewa and Houghton Counties