

The Youth Leadership Academy:
A Program Review



THE YOUTH LEADERSHIP ACADEMY: A PROGRAM REVIEW

Summary

The 2010-2011 Grand Jury conducted a program review of the Probation Department's Youth Leadership Academy. The Academy is one of five juvenile detention facilities, and the only one designated as a Re-entry/Transitional Living Program. As such, the Academy has as its goal the successful re-entry of youth 17 – 20 years of age into their communities. The facility collaborates with the Orange County Department of Education and the Health Care Agency for essential services, and has developed an extensive array of community-based and volunteer services to facilitate successful re-entry for probationers. For the past year, the program has implemented changes in policy, procedures and evidence-based practices, i.e., approaches for which empirical research has found demonstrated effectiveness.

Findings include decreases in altercations and other signs of aggressive behavior within the program, and increases in the attitude, motivation and skills needed to avoid re-offending. Recommendations include utilizing more effective outcome measures with respect to decreasing recidivism, and finding ways to strengthen and take more advantage of evidence-based practices.

Reason for Study

The Youth Leadership Academy (YLA) is one of five Orange County Probation Department juvenile correctional facilities. Each facility is characterized by different levels of security, age-ranges of youth, physical location, and type or style of intervention / rehabilitation program.¹

The YLA is a relatively new program (established in 2006) and has not been studied by a Grand Jury. During 2010, a new Director was appointed for the YLA. After completing a review of the operation, she introduced significant changes in policies and procedures regarding how the program would be operated, and how wards were to be managed during their terms. Also the YLA, along with all Probation Department programs, has had to meet expense reduction targets due to county and state budget deficits.

The purpose of this study was to determine how the YLA has evolved during the past few years, what changes occurred with budget reductions and new program leadership; the rationale for those change and the resulting impact on

¹ The other four facilities are the Joplin Youth Center, Theo Lacy Juvenile Annex, the Youth Guidance Center, and Juvenile Hall.

wards and staff members; what the current goals and objectives are and, in particular, what measurable outcomes are expected, and are they being achieved?

Methodology

Information and data were collected from:

- Two on-site visits to the program facility
- Interviews with
 - an administrative representative from the Probation Department
 - key YLA staff persons at different levels of responsibility
 - staff members from collaborative county departments (e.g., OC Department of Education, OC Health Care Agency, OC Conservation Corps) who work directly with YLA residents
 - four current residents at YLA and two in transition back to the community
- Review of
 - written program descriptive material, newsletters, Internet web pages, and other information designed for public consumption
 - intra-department quarterly progress and expenditure reports
 - program administrative material (e.g., intake / assessment forms, release and transitional planning documents, program level information, and other internal documents)

Facts

Fact: The percent of OC juvenile probationers completing formal probation without a new violation has remained essentially unchanged, at about 65%, for the past ten years.

Fact: The YLA opened in July 2006 as a “juvenile camp facility” with two, two-story 60-bed units, but currently operates one unit due to ongoing county and state budget reductions; the second unit was idled in March of 2010.

Fact: The YLA has been designated a Re-entry / Transitional Living program.

Fact: The youth entering YLA are considered to be at a high risk to re-offend; 10 – 15% have committed misdemeanors; 85 – 90% have been convicted of felonies.

Fact: Minors complete their juvenile justice commitments even if they become adults (turn 18) in custody.

Fact: The average length of commitment to YLA is 120 days.

- the average length of actual stay in the program is 75 days
- current range of stay extends from as few as 15 days up to 180 days

Fact: During the fourth quarter of 2010 (Oct. – Dec.):

- the average daily census was 53 residents, and there were 83 intakes and 85 releases from the unit
- 54% were less than 18 years old; 46% were 18 or older
- 76% were Hispanic, 19% White, 3% Asian, and 2% Black

Fact: Total budget expenditures for the 2009–10 Fiscal Year were \$5,690,265; there currently are 32 total full-time equivalent positions in the budget.

Fact: The YLA utilizes evidence-based practices, i.e., structured, outcome-oriented, research-supported programming to effect measurable changes in each resident’s attitude, behavior, and direction in life.

Analysis

County Juvenile Correctional Facilities

The YLA is one of five Probation Department juvenile detention and rehabilitation facilities. Once offenders receive a commitment from the court, the Probation Department assesses and assigns each to one of the five according to several factors, including age at time offense and current age, length of commitment, gender, seriousness of offense, potential for rehabilitation, need for substance abuse treatment, and how close they are to completing their commitments. Table 1 summarizes the differences between, and how the various facilities complement each other.

When entering the juvenile justice system, each ward is screened for mental health issues by county Health Care Agency staff members in the Clinical Evaluation and Guidance Unit (CEGU) situated in Juvenile Hall. Re-evaluations may occur whenever needed.

Table 1 – Characteristics of OC Probation Juvenile Detention Facilities*

Facility / Location	Size	Ages/Sex	Primary Juvenile Justice Purpose
Juvenile Hall City of Orange	380 Beds	12 – 20 M / F	Primarily provides secure housing pending adjudication in Juvenile Court; has an inmate intake and release center
Joplin Youth Center Trabuco Canyon	64 Beds	13 – 16 Males	“Outdoor” non-secure correctional facility with residential treatment and restorative justice programs
Lacy Juvenile Annex Theo Lacy Men’s Jail City of Orange	56 Beds	14 – 20 Males	Houses high security-risk minors, and those charged with crimes “as adults,” while proceeding through the adult court system
Youth Guidance Center Santa Ana	80 Beds	13 – 20 60 M/20 F	Primarily substance abuse treatment in a non-secure residential facility, and restorative justice programs
Youth Leadership Academy City of Orange	60 Beds	17.5 – 20 Males	Non-secure residential facility providing range of services to effect a successful re-entry to community, using evidence-based practices

*Source: OC Dept of Probation website, April 2011

Because most of the wards are minors, each facility, regardless of location or other specialized aspects, provides State-mandated public education under the auspices of the County Department of Education, including special education services, if needed. Younger wards are provided classroom instruction in accordance with their grade-level achievement and learning needs; older wards are supported in completing high school graduation requirements or earning a General Equivalency Diploma (GED).

The Youth Leadership Academy

The stated goal of the YLA is to develop the youth in their care into “young men of character, honor, and integrity.” The ultimate goal, looked at more operationally, is to decrease the probability and frequency of re-offending, or recidivism. Because of the age and developmental stage of juvenile offenders, especially those about to re-enter society, the YLA, and current Probation Department officials, view programs like this as being perhaps the last good opportunity to help youthful offenders make a significant course correction – from a life of criminality to a life as a productive, responsible citizen.

In addition to providing a secure and safe detention facility, the Youth Leadership Academy implements comprehensive programming designed to prepare young adults (committed as minors) to successfully transition back into the community at the completion of their terms. This is accomplished by providing an extensive array of individualized rehabilitative services, including remedial education, behavioral intervention and pro-social developmental

programs, substance abuse and mental health services, and by developing extensive community outreach opportunities. The program is dedicated to using evidence-based institutional programming, i.e., research-tested programs that have been demonstrated to be effective, and the adoption of attitudes and behaviors by staff members that are actively encouraging and supportive, rather than merely custodial.

The Otto Fischer School, situated in Juvenile Hall is operated by the Orange County Department of Education (OCDE), and provides on-site public education academic and special education services. Approximately 20% of YLA residents² are special education eligible. The OCDE also provides vocational instruction and employment assistance for residents. When receiving classroom instruction, YLA residents are not intermixed with those in other detention facility programs.

Both physical and mental health services are provided on-site by the county Health Care Agency (HCA). Specific departments involved include Child and Youth Mental Health Services and Institutional Health Services. The HCA also staffs the Clinical Evaluation and Guidance Unit (CEGU) which, in addition to screening wards entering the juvenile justice system, can provide YLA residents with individual and group counseling, and 24-hour crisis intervention, as needed.

On-site substance abuse and alcohol education and treatment services, including sober living activities are provided by a contract with Providence Community Services, a local community agency.

Additional services, such as reading skill development, academic subject tutoring, community service experiences, and restorative justice opportunities are provided through the Probation Department's extensive volunteer program.

Interventions and Evidence-Based Practices

YLA is not merely a detention facility. When they arrive, residents are told up front they are entering a "treatment program." Although not spelled out at first, what they are being treated for is anti-social, illegal behavior that has landed them in custody. The intervention will be "...personal skill development and growth...Regardless of what you are serving time for, your opportunity to grow and change begins now."³ Almost every hour of every day is scheduled with assignments, activities, and classes or groups to advance each resident's education, prosocial development, problem-solving skills, and discharge planning.

² Although technically still "wards" of the County, the YLA refers to the youth as "residents."

³ From the Introduction, "Orientation-Rules-Program Overview" packet given to each new resident.

Residents are told the program believes “...each young person has the potential to become a responsible leader and we would like to provide you with the fundamentals to achieve that goal.”

As in many institutional settings designed for youth, the YLA uses a “level system.” Residents wear different colored t-shirts to indicate which level they currently are on, and all new residents start at the “bottom,” on level one. Moving up a level earns increasing amounts of autonomy and more privileges. To change levels, residents must complete specific “assignments.” Staff persons are available to assist and tutor residents working on level assignments, and such work creates opportunities for mentoring and facilitates the development of positive relationships. For example, in order to move from Level 1 to Level 2, assignments include writing a detailed autobiography and a one-page essay about the resident’s family. Level 3 and 4 privileges include unsecured room doors, video game time, on-ground furloughs (e.g., to an OC County library), and off-ground furloughs. To get to the higher levels, residents need to complete a three-page Goal Setting Worksheet, read books selected for them by their counselor and write a report, and complete a sample job application form, among other requirements. An important part of this sort of plan is for all aspects of the system to be clearly defined and communicated to both residents and staff members, reliably implemented, and quickly applied. Rules that are enforced inconsistently, and delayed reinforcement or punishment rapidly decrease effectiveness.

Thinking For a Change

The level advancement system provides an overall structure and sets the tone for specific interactions with the residents. The centerpiece intervention, however, is the use of a specific evidence-based practice (EBP): the “Thinking for a Change” (T4C) program. The T4C curriculum was developed by the National Institute of Corrections⁴ (NIC), and consists of 22 group sessions and can be expanded to meet the needs of specific participants. Groups are limited to 12 participants and may be delivered up to three times per week.

Participants may enter the series at any point. In order to maintain fidelity to the original research-tested model, facilitators are required to follow a scripted manual that determines the content and objectives of each session. T4C is designed for offenders and focuses on cognitive restructuring, and the development of social skills and problem solving skills. Sessions include role-play illustrations of concepts, a review of previous lessons, and “homework” assignments in which participants practice skills learned in the group.

The advantage of using an EBP is two-fold. First, in plain language, the agency or program is doing “what works.” Effectiveness has been demonstrated by

⁴ National Institute of Corrections, <http://nicic.gov/T4C>.

scientifically valid research studies. The EBP has been “manualized,” i.e., put into an instructional or trainable format that allows it to be replicated in different settings, institutions, or locations. Fidelity to the research-tested version, however, must be maintained in order to count on the same outcomes. Second, utilizing EBP’s takes advantage of the latest knowledge and research the field of criminology has to offer regarding improving effectiveness. Programs that are demonstratively effective – that can produce measurable outcomes – are the ones that can garner community and political support, thereby increasing financial stability and the possibility of growth and expansion once budget conditions improve.

Program Philosophy

Interviews with both Probation Department and YLA leaders revealed a dedicated interest in making a positive difference in the lives of their charges. On a larger scale, the question of the ultimate purpose of “corrections” arises. Incarceration, of course, serves the primary purposes of punishment and the protection of society from those who have sought to victimize others. Historically, “reform schools” and “reformatories” at least had the intention of rehabilitation in addition to punishment. However, if rehabilitation truly is a goal, then (1) extra efforts must be made above and beyond those needed merely for safety and security, and (2) it necessitates the use of methods that work, i.e., programs that have demonstrated effectiveness.

In addition to utilizing a specific evidence-based program (Thinking For a Change or T4C), the YLA also has embraced and is working with its staff to implement core principles of learning theory and mentoring. Long used in the fields of psychology, education, counseling and guidance, and personnel management, these “laws of learning” include the effectiveness of positive reinforcement, fair and consistent rules, timely application of both rewards and punishment, and providing positive and negative consequences that “fit” the behavior. The rewards must be meaningful, and the punishments need to be in proportion to the offense.

An example of this is the new director replaced “Behavior Notices” with “Progressive Discipline Reports” (PDR). Behavior notices are akin to being “written up” and they tended to be used indiscriminately. PDR’s begin with a clear and direct command. If the problem continues but can successfully be managed with counseling the minor, nothing else is necessary. If the problem behavior repeats, the next higher level of restriction is applied. Counselors are trained to use the least amount of restriction or exclusion necessary to contain or control the behavior. Of course, whatever is required for safety and security is provided, but a measured response is used so that the “time fits the crime.” YLA has coordinated with the OC Department of Education teachers to use the same PDR’s in the classrooms. Above all, the objective of using PDR’s is to stop the practice of room confinement as a primary behavioral control. YLA believes

using indeterminate room confinements for minor misbehavior is contrary to the goals of the program, and tends to exacerbate behavior problems. Frequently it leads to depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and increased aggressiveness. Aside from the longstanding validity of these principles, their application in a fair and consistent manner, especially with young people, conveys a general attitude of respect, positive expectations, and trust in their potential to grow and change.

YLA staff members and collaborative community partners are encouraged to actively develop positive relationships with the youth, and act as mentors to them. The mentoring role is evident not only during direct supervision and counseling, but also in small group work and classes, during social skills training, character and values education, victim awareness, and even informally during the day. For many of these young men, YLA staff persons are the first and only people who have shown a genuine interest in them and their potential. Staff members, supervisors, and directors reported that these changes have improved working conditions for them also. Absenteeism and other indicators of job stress have declined, as there is less anxiety, anger and acting out by residents.

Clearly, the first and foremost responsibility of the YLA staff is the safety and security of residents, staff, and the community. Perhaps the biggest lesson learned regarding how YLA youth are treated and managed by the staff is: treating incarcerated youth in a fair and consistent manner, and by showing a genuine interest in and respect for them as individuals doesn't need to compromise safety and security. It decreases anger, frustration and stress on both sides of the table.

Community Re-Entry Planning

A vital activity of the YLA is individualized planning for re-entry into the community. Because of their ages and other factors, the young men leaving the YLA and the county juvenile justice system are transitioning both from detention to freedom and, just as importantly, from adolescence to responsible adulthood. For most of them, before they were incarcerated, local gang activity was both a way of life and a kind of family support system. For many, the gang milieu was the only place to get attention, appreciation and respect. Even for those who manage to avoid gang associations, most come from families unable to provide the structure, support, and discipline needed to keep out of trouble. Therefore effective planning for re-entry into the community needs to be done strategically.

YLA transitional planning and individualized case management services begin upon entry into the program. Within the first 15 days of intake, a counselor reviews the resident's file, identifies specific risk factors for re-offending, and begins matching the resident to program resources. Risk factors are individual psychosocial characteristics that have been identified through research to

increase the likelihood of re-offending upon release. They include antisocial beliefs and behavior, criminal peers, dysfunctional family history, low levels of education, and history of alcohol / substance abuse. At 30 days, the counselor convenes a Re-Entry Team meeting, at which time the minor and family members meet with YLA staff to review his progress to date, and complete a plan of action going forward. Team members include the minor, parent(s), field probation officers, school staff (teacher / counselor), psychosocial staff (from CEGU), a resource coordinator, and possibly others significant to the minor. For each of the following areas, progress to date, goals, and an action plan is documented: Unit Behavior (critical thinking and antisocial behavior), Recreation (extra-curricular hobbies / interests), Substance Abuse, Mental Health, Criminal Associates / Gang Issues, Education & Employment, Family, Parenting (including resident-teen parent issues), and Housing issues. Subsequent informal meetings are held regarding the plan, to update and modify it as needed. Fifteen days prior to a planned release date, the resident's counselor meets with him to go over the plan and discuss successes and areas that need continued attention.

According to YLA staff members, experience has shown it is essential to have an individualized support system in place before the release from custody. Accordingly, the staff resource coordinator actively works to link each resident to whatever community resources would be the most helpful. Community resource development and coordination is an ongoing, dynamic process, with the coordinator seeking to find and match both existing and newly discovered resources for each resident nearing release. Nearly 30 members of the group Volunteers in Probation, student interns, and additional religious volunteers play a major role in giving on-going and follow-up support. Many residents, by successfully displaying increasing levels of individual responsibility, are able to participate in education, employment, or community service furloughs prior to being released. In addition to linking transitioning residents to resources for education, job training, and employment, the resource coordinator also has developed an impressive array of adjunctive resources including tattoo removal, continuing gang prevention and intervention programs, and clothing appropriate for job interviews and, assistance with transportation needs.

Interviews with Residents

Interviews were conducted with four residents in the program (at YLA) and two actively transitioning back to the community (at the Grand Jury offices). Interviews were conducted without staff persons present. The residents were uniformly positive regarding their experiences and time at YLA. The transitioning youth had taken advantage of opportunities to get job training skill development.

One was working in an Orange County Conservation Corp (OCCC) job program, learning landscaping and maintenance. He felt good about being able to

contribute earnings to help his family financially. At Level 4 in the YLA, his daily workweek schedule was working on a landscape crew from 8 A.M. until 3:15 P.M. He returned to YLA for classes until 5:15 P.M. and then stayed at his home for the night. He reported he has been able to avoid continued involvement with a neighborhood gang – a condition of continuing in YLA and OCCC position.

The other was in a work-study opportunity in the area of office work. He was attending computer classes at Santa Ana College and also was allowed to stay home at nights. He also is being assisted by another community program, Taller San Jose⁵, in how to write a resume and interview for jobs, and that program also has helped him obtain a driver's license and open a personal bank account.

For both of these residents, the YLA resource coordinator had assessed their individual strengths and weaknesses, goals and objectives, and helped make connections for them within the community or collaborative county programs, to help make their transition back to the community successful. Both young men identified the adjunctive resources, counseling, and individual attention they had received as being very helpful. Both had been gang associates and felt that YLA had given them the opportunity for a “new start.” For the most part they had been treated with respect and that was appreciated. Both felt the Thinking For a Change program had helped them learn how to make better decisions. When asked for any problems they had seen, they mentioned some staff persons continued to be unnecessarily negative or punitive (with other residents), when it wasn't really necessary for safety and security.

Issues Regarding Effectiveness

Using recognized evidence-based practices goes a long way toward ensuring program effectiveness. However, being able to produce meaningful, measurable outcomes has an even greater impact on legislators, policy makers, taxpayers, and concerned members of the community. One statistic reported indicated the number of physical restraints needed at YLA dropped from a high of 14 per month in June, 2010, to zero by January, 2011. However, restraint statistics for the five juvenile detention facilities together showed a similar overall decrease, and the overall population of county incarcerated juvenile offenders during the same period declined from a high of 634 to a two-year low of 543. For the last half of calendar year 2010, YLA reported no physical altercations between residents, assaults on staff by residents, escapes, or suicide attempts.

Internal program data are important but field outcome data would be even more useful. The YLA has not been able to implement follow-up or post release

⁵ St. Joseph's Workshop – a community-based nonprofit agency in Santa Ana

accounting of re-offending or recidivism rates for graduates of the program. For a period of time just before 2010, the Probation Department benefited from a National Technical Assistance (TA) grant to support the use of evidence-based practices designed to reduce recidivism and improve public safety. Although the primary focus of these efforts was on the adult probation population, the broader scope and effects of the initiative were expected to apply to work with juvenile offenders as well. The TA grant ended in January, 2010, and the work was expected to continue, but subsequent county and state budget cuts have caused these efforts to be suspended.

Findings:

In accordance with *California Penal Code* Sections 933 and 933.05, the 2010-2011 Grand Jury requests responses from the agencies affected by the findings presented in this section. The responses are to be submitted to the Presiding Judge of Superior Court.

Based on its investigation of the Youth Leadership Academy, the 2010-2011 Orange County Grand Jury has six principal findings:

- F1:** The primary way the YLA responded to the need to significantly reduce overall budget expenditures was to idle one of two units; therefore the program is operating at approximately half capacity.
- F2:** New management has successfully implemented changes in how residents are regarded and treated, and has instituted evidence-based programming.
- F3:** The YLA has just undergone another change of leadership (March 2011); so far, changes that were implemented are expected to continue for the foreseeable future.
- F4:** The YLA has been successful in improving overall security and safety, as indicated by the near elimination of serious problem behaviors on the unit.
- F5:** Although the program has been successful with adopting evidence-based practices, more work needs to be done to measure outcomes, including progress toward reducing recidivism.
- F6:** The program has developed effective links to the community to facilitate the successful transition of residents back into their neighborhoods.

Recommendations:

In accordance with *California Penal Code* Sections 933 and 933.05, the 2010-2011 Grand Jury requests responses from the agencies affected by the

recommendations presented in this section. The responses are to be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court.

Based on its investigation of the Youth Leadership Academy, the 2010-2011 Orange County Grand Jury makes the following six recommendations:

- R1: Recast program goals into measurable objectives (e.g., recidivism rates for YLA graduates) in order to facilitate the quantification of results.**
- R2: Develop efficient ways to track the progress of YLA graduates in order to better measure rates of recidivism; use this information to demonstrate program effectiveness over time.**
- R3: Continue to search for research and training grants, including private foundation and professional association grants.**
- R4: Develop collaborative ties to a criminology department at a local university or college; encourage graduate students working on master's theses and doctoral dissertations to study YLA programs and outcomes.**
- R5: Improve the utility of current quarterly statistical reports by incorporating short empirical studies, surveys, and analyses of data already being collected.**
- R6: When using specific Evidence-Based Programs, maintain fidelity to the model's procedures and interventions, so that YLA results will be empirically supported.**

REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS:

The California Penal Code Section 933(c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. Such comment shall be made *no later than 90 days* after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court); except that in the case of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an elected County official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such comment shall be made *within 60 days* to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors.

Furthermore, California Penal Code Sections 933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

- (a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:

- (1) The respondent agrees with the finding
 - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefore.
- (b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
- (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
 - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
 - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.
 - (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefore.
- (c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with the Penal Code Section 933.05 are requested from the:

Responding Agency	Findings	Recommendations
Chief Probation Officer, Orange Co. Probation Dept.	F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6

Commendation:

The Probation Department and Youth Leadership Academy are commended for employing research-tested programs and techniques to effect rehabilitation efforts.