

**AN OVERVIEW OF THE NEW OPTIONS INITIATIVE: A JOINT PROJECT OF  
THE CENTER ON JUVENILE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND THE SAN  
FRANCISCO PUBLIC DEFENDER’S OFFICE**

In the July 2002, the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice and the San Francisco Public Defender’s Office launched the *New Options Initiative* to reduce the population of youth awaiting placement in San Francisco’s Youth Guidance Center (YGC). This population was long regarded as a primary cause of high occupancy rates within the YGC. The high occupancy rates resulted from the inability of the probation department’s placement unit to expedite suitable residential placements or consider nonresidential alternatives. The failure to expedite out-of-home placement resulted in youths languishing for weeks in the YGC. Part of the difficulty in placing these youths was attributed to their perceived risk for re-offense or running away. A large number of the youths had histories of prior unsuccessful placements, which increased the difficulty in finding new placements. The special challenges presented by this population were continually cited as a primary reason for San Francisco’s YGC’s historic high occupancy rates. The project was designed to promote the Anne E Casey’s Foundation’s *Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative* (JDAI) efforts in San Francisco. CJCJ and the Public Defender’s Office have been active participants in the San Francisco JDAI process since 2001.

In July of 2001 the Youth Law Center released a report on the state of San Francisco’s juvenile justice system. Youth Law Center authors made eight recommendations to the probation department and identified nine areas of concern, which they strongly urged the department to immediately address. A key area of concern was the amount of time a youth spent awaiting either an initial placement or re-placement after a placement failure. Data from May 2000 indicated that the *average* amount of time a youth spent awaiting a change of placement was 75 days. The report proposed that the department take a “second look” at so called placement failures to “determine whether some of these youth could be better served in community settings, e.g., with wrap-around services.”

### **Program Description**

In an effort to reduce the YGC population awaiting placement and demonstrate the availability of alternative options, CJCJ and the San Francisco Public Defender's Office created the *New Options Initiative*. The strategy involved establishing a placement expeditor within the public defender's office and creating a CJCJ placement specialist. Working in partnership with the public defender's placement expeditor, CJCJ's placement specialist assisted in identifying the 25-35 youth awaiting placement. Two categories of youth were considered: youths awaiting placement following disposition and placement failures awaiting a new placement.

The primary responsibility of the placement attorney at the public defender's office is to initially identify the pool of youths who are sitting in detention and awaiting placement. For placement failures, an investigation of which placement options have been used previously and an exploration of the reasons behind the initial placement decision along with possible causes for the previous failure are essential. A determination of the current best placement option is then made. The placement attorney then requests a "change in circumstance" hearing (California Welfare and Institutions Code Section 778). Prior to the hearing, the CJCJ placement specialist and public defender expeditor identify resources and placement options to present to the court as the basis for the hearing. The placement options are then presented to the court. Judges adopt approximately 80% of case recommendations.

In most instances, youths are returned home with intensive case management services in lieu of residential placement. Case management services are provided through CJCJ's Detention Diversion Advocacy Program (DDAP). Of the 30 youths who have been returned home in the past six months under case management supervision, none have re-offended. In the other instances, public defender and CJCJ staffs were able to accelerate the placement of youths in licensed residential settings who could not return home.

On April 1<sup>st</sup> 2002 there were 35 youth in secure detention awaiting placement by November of that same year the figure was down to 1. Approximately 80% of the minors were being placed within 60 days of the initial out of home placement order and many youths, due to the diligence of public defender and CJCJ staff, had been accepted into a group home by the time of the case's final disposition.

### **Project Implications**

Currently thousands of California youths are committed to residential placement each year. As in San Francisco, many of these youths languish in secure detention centers for extended periods. The *New Options Initiative* demonstrates that a large percentage of these youths could be maintained in their homes and communities if appropriate services were made available. It also demonstrates the benefits of partnerships and collaborative efforts between different juvenile justice agencies. The project was implemented by CJCJ and public defenders office, yet was supported by probation staff, judges, and district attorneys.

By decreasing out-of-home placement by up to two thirds, jurisdictions throughout the nation could improve community-based services and significantly reduce costs (a typical residential placement ranges between \$3500 to \$4500 per month while an intensive case management ranges from \$1000 to \$2500). The *New Options Initiatives*, while still in its incipient stage, demonstrates the potential impact of a project specifically designed to reduce confinement time and implement new placement options.

### **Future Directions**

The *New Options Initiative* demonstrates that a majority of high-risk youths designated for out-of-home placement in a large urban jurisdiction, can be safely returned to the community with appropriate services. The initiative was designed as a pilot demonstration project to promote the Anne E Casey's Foundation's JDAI process.

Institutionalizing the project will require reallocating categorical residential placement funds to community-based services. Reallocating categorical funds designated for out-of-

home placement ensures greater flexibility in designing individualized services and allows jurisdictions to achieve cost savings by reducing unnecessary placement. Such reallocation is currently allowed under California Senate Bill 933. However, since its passage in 1998, no county has attempted to take advantage of its flexible funding provisions. The next step in the *New Options Initiative* will be identifying and accessing new funding streams that will further reduce unnecessary placement and allow an expansion of community-based services.