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# SolutionSERIES

PROVIDING CARE AND CUSTODY WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT WITHIN COLORADO DIVISION OF YOUTH SERVICES

by Tony Gherardini, Deputy Executive Director, Colorado Department of Human Services

In December of each year, at the main administration building for the Colorado Department of Human Services, a Christmas Tree is placed in the entryway. The tree is decorated with ornaments listing the age, gender, and gift preference for a child in need. Human Services employees pick an ornament from the tree and purchase a gift for a young child that they will likely never meet. While this may seem like a standard giving tree, the unique feature of this tree is that the gifts are given to the children of youth within the Colorado Division of Youth Services (DYS). This small, yet poignant act of giving raises larger questions: "How are these teens learning to be parents? How many more holidays will they miss spending with their children? Who are their children spending their days with if not their parents? Parenting is an everyday activity, and time missed cannot be recaptured. How then, can the Department hope to rehabilitate young parents too? How can the Department set these teens on a path of appreciation for their children, and imbue within them an understanding of their responsibilities as a parent?"

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*Every child needs their parents in their life.*

- DYS Parenting Youth

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For over 300 Colorado teens, home is a place they are not allowed to leave, and where they are under 24-hour supervision by the state. The average young person served within the Colorado Division of Youth Services is placed in state custody for a little over 27 months. These youthful offenders are typically placed within DYS for offenses ranging from drug sales, robbery, and gang activity, to aggravated assault and murder. During their commitment with the state, these young people are provided education, training, and mental health treatment to help prepare them for a successful transition back to the community and to hopefully prevent future negative interactions with the law. While DYS provides support and housing for the youth in its care, no organization can replace a parent. The Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), which oversees the Division of Youth Services, is working to maintain parent-child connections and relationships among committed youth and their parents, as well as between parenting youth and their own children. CDHS has acted upon a series of recommendations, outlined below, that include parenting curricula, home visiting and other benefits connections, and facilities upgrades to help address the destabilizing toll of incarceration on youth and their children.

Fifty-five percent of youth return home to their parents after their commitment, and numerous committed youth are parents themselves and are unable to fully participate in their children's lives. In order to ensure these crucial

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relationships are preserved, the Department has focused upon designing approaches that impact parents of committed youth, committed youth themselves, and the children of committed, parenting youth.

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*I want to see my child every day. It sucks being a dad one time a week.*

- DYS Parenting Youth

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The Colorado Division of Youth Services is working to transform the family experience by taking a two-generation (2Gen) approach to the services it provides. Adopting a 2Gen approach to developing positive outcomes for the entire family is a key component to strengthening the economic health and well-being of the family. Through this approach, the Department of Human Services is working to ensure commitment and incarceration do not become family legacies. Working with Ascend at the Aspen Institute, state human services staff, community members, youth within DYS, and their parents, the Department is committed to creating an environment of "Care and Custody with Dignity and Respect."

Nationally, over 60,000 youth are incarcerated each day (ACLU, 2018). These young people face numerous barriers to returning to their communities, and the Division of Youth Services is seeking to address family stability by providing parents the support their families need when youth return to their communities. For teens who are also parenting, the family is affected across three generations – their parent(s), the offending youth, and their own children.

While much is known about the impact on children of incarcerated adults, much less is known regarding teen parents who are incarcerated and the impact this has on their children—who are most typically under the age of five when the parent is sentenced to youth services. Incarceration results in family destabilization, economic hardships, and emotional trauma. The toll of parental incarceration is well documented, including the need for policy and practices "that put the needs of incarcerated parents first," (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016).

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*My recommendation is that children are able to attend parenting classes with their parent.*

- DYS Parenting Youth

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Children under the age of six who have an incarcerated parent have 12 more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) than children without incarcerated parents. Research suggests that the greater the number of ACEs, the greater likelihood of lasting harm (Murphey & Cooper, 2015).

Research into incarcerated parents has resulted in a number of recommendations which can and should be applied to juvenile facilities. Using the 2016 and 2015 reports, *A Shared Sentence and Parents Behind Bars: What Happens to their Children*, the Colorado Division of Youth Services has embarked upon an ambitious plan to provide committed youth with care and dignity while encouraging family bonding. Recommendations currently being enacted within Colorado include:

- Ensuring that parenting education is available and encouraged in all five state-run commitment facilities and available both for the incarcerated youth and for the parent who will have a young person return home;
- Ensuring that parenting classes are not used as a reward or punishment for behavior but are available to all teen parents;
- Family visits with children in attendance to be held in appropriate facilities that are child-friendly and less scary than the traditional institutional setting. These settings need to be appropriate for young children who are visiting a parent as well as parents who are visiting their committed daughter or son;
- Connectivity and enrollment with home visitation services during their commitment and upon release for teen parents;
- Connecting parents of a returning youth with access to education, health care, and employment for themselves and for their returning child to strengthen the economic health and well-being of the family;
- Working to ensure that all family members are provided information on financial and behavioral supports such as assistance with enrollment in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid, job training, and child care programs.

The journey towards creating a system that transforms the lives of young people, their parents, and their children has not been easy. Critics of the new service-oriented culture within DYS have voiced doubts, saying the Division is “not day care,” and that youth are “committed as a punishment.” The fact is, the state of Colorado has entrusted the Department of Human Services and DYS to provide rehabilitation to these youth in order to prepare them to return to their families and communities. In adult corrections, there have long been parenting programs such as Parents on a Mission and MotherWise, which focus on healthy relationships and practical skills for communicating with partners, family, and even co-workers. Similar programs are therefore essential for supporting parenting youth within DYS to return to the community prepared to parent in a developmentally appropriate, pro-social fashion.

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*Right now I've taken it upon myself to get actively involved in a parenting class in my community. I go every other Saturday.*

- DYS Parenting Youth

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Of equal import is parent-education support for parents who are preparing to have a young person return to the home. These parents need the financial and behavioral health supports in place to prevent further offenses, to support their parenting in new ways, and to ensure that crimes are not committed out of a sense of economic desperation.

Young people within DYS are also actively involved in implementing the aforementioned transformative initiatives.

Most importantly, parents are experiencing the change in approach as an improvement in outcomes, and in the quality of interaction with their families.

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*A lot of stress...being separated from him. My commitment was... lengthy, it seemed like there was no end. So in the beginning I was like 'Man, what am I going to do?' But being here with all the opportunities has helped me...learn how to be a better person, for me and [my son].*

- DYS Parenting Youth

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## REFERENCES

Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2016). *A Shared Sentence; The Devastating Toll of Parental Incarceration on Kids, Families and Communities*.

ACLU. (2018). *America's Addition to Juvenile Incarceration: State by State*. Retrieved from: [www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/youth-incarceration/americas-addiction-juvenile-incarceration-state-state](http://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/youth-incarceration/americas-addiction-juvenile-incarceration-state-state)

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