

**Ada County Juvenile Court Services
Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiatives:
A Better Way To Do Business**

By Joseph A. Vraspir. M.Ed.,
ACJCS Placement Coordinator

In 2001, Ada County Juvenile Court Services (ACJCS) received a grant from the Casey Foundation to establish innovative new detention alternatives in our jurisdiction. This would prove to be a monumental undertaking, as the development of detention alternatives alone is not indicative of success of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI). For JDAI to be effective and thrive, a systemic approach must be utilized, for it is not solely about detention alternatives; it is about entire systems reform. It is about changing the manner in which business is carried out, agency-wide. In short, without systems reform, JDAI would not be successful. Paramount to JDAI's success is a *core belief* by county officials, agency administration, and line staff that JDAI will succeed, because it requires an intricate collaboration of all these business areas. For ACJCS, it proved difficult at times for some parties to look at different ways of operating, as they felt that the old way of doing business was either the "right" or "only" way business could be done.

JDAI implementation has affected the entire agency, with many changes occurring. For example, something as simple as scheduling subsequent Detention Reviews at the time of Detention Hearings has proven very effective. This step alone has eliminated the clogged pipeline of requests for ten-day reviews, and allowed for all parties to be present and complete the necessary paperwork in time for the next hearing. In turn, this has ensured the next Court action on a case will take place within a shortened period of time. Administratively, this has been beneficial with hearings less frequently requested, motioned up, and scheduled; and families are notified and their signatures obtained prior to hearings.

An additional check and balance has been added to this system: An objective risk assessment (RAI) tool was put in place to ensure juveniles entering the system through detention are assessed according to their current risk to flee the jurisdiction and their risk to the community and themselves. The RAI has afforded the agency the capacity to remove subjectivity, which at times kept juveniles in secure confinement. The aforementioned ten-day reviews, coupled with the RAI, brought to light the types of crimes that should and should not be in custody, and became instrumental in assuring that juveniles do not remain in custody without attention to their cases. Added to that, an expedited in-custody sentencing process also decreased the time juveniles languished in custody. All of these changes in practice have resulted in steeply lowering and maintaining smaller daily populations and shortened lengths of stay, which are two measures that translate into significant cost savings.

Implementation of JDAI is educational and relationship-driven. JDAI is not about keeping juveniles out of secure confinement, quite the contrary; it is about keeping the right juveniles in secure confinement, and about offering low-level offenders viable, productive, and mutually beneficial alternatives to detention. Detention Staff initially skeptical of JDAI now maintain that having a lower population accomplished several objectives. It has allowed for greater positive interaction with juveniles in custody, despite the lower population comprising more serious offenders. Lower populations have resulted in fewer incidents in detention because the staff-to-juvenile ratio is lower. Lower populations have also allowed for expanded group programming. Collectively, these positive changes have correlated with increased staff and juvenile morale.

Imperative to the success of JDAI and systems reform is the development of relationships, what I believe to be the core of success. There must be a compromising approach to achieving the ultimate goal, meaning the relationships developed are collaborative among parties both directly and indirectly involved in the process. The parties involved include Judges, attorneys, probation staff, and detention staff. The process is not something that can be force-fed to anyone. Bearing in mind that change is often slow and incremental, there has to be give and take for the greater good. A working knowledge of all aspects of the entire system is fundamental to success. I believe that those at the JDAI helm, so to speak, must have a fundamental understanding of the Court process, probation practice, and ancillary services such as foster care and transitional care. There must also be a strong understanding of child development stages as youth progress through adolescence.

ACJCS offers a wide range of detention alternative programs. The Work in Lieu of Detention (WILD) program offers juveniles who may have otherwise been in secure confinement an opportunity to give back to their community by providing service to community agencies, free of charge. The program has saved many thousands of dollars for community agencies by allowing predominantly low-level and carefully screened offenders to participate in work projects. Other detention alternative programs used by the Court include the following: The Weekend Detention Program focuses on accountability and competency development. Release on Recognizance (ROR) is primarily for juveniles who encounter the system for the first time or for those who do not meet detention criteria. Detention Release Orders (DROs) are for juveniles needing additional supervision and specific conditions to remain in the community. Electronic Monitoring (EM) and other variations DROs are for juveniles requiring even more supervision and structure to remain in the community. A violation of EM or specific conditions of a DRO, which may be the last viable options to secure confinement, could result in a juvenile returning to custody until disposition of their case.

In closing, JDAI has become a philosophical mindset that has proven effective in offering alternatives to secure confinement, and it has made clear there are more effective ways to operate the entire system. For JDAI to succeed there must be

open-mindedness, cooperation, collaboration, and commitment. For ACJCS, JDAI has opened new doors to creativity in managing cases and reducing recidivism by focusing on appropriate sanctions for each case. JDAI allows staff to experience greater success, and more importantly provides for successful rehabilitation for the families and children we serve on a daily basis.