



“INTENSIVE AFTERCARE” IN JUVENILE CORRECTIONS— THE COLORADO EXPERIENCE

Two years ago, when “Dusty” (not his real name) was sentenced to Colorado’s Division of Juvenile Corrections, his future was dim. Assessed as “high risk,” and requiring placement in a long term secure residential program, he was grouped with those least likely to succeed and most likely to reoffend. Today, as one of the first graduates of the Intensive Aftercare Program (IAP), Dusty has become a high achiever who has already beaten the odds against him.

Dusty’s criminal history included arrests and repetitive adjudications for delinquent acts ranging from theft to sexual assault. His first adjudication at age 13, combined with substance abuse treatment needs, prior out-of-home placement, and single-parent family added up to a risk-of-reoffense profile that spells trouble for corrections professionals. In many cases, juveniles with similar histories spend two or more years in secure correctional facilities, and there is a probability that they will reoffend, be arrested and convicted within a few months of release. Why did Dusty beat these odds? Our agency hopes that the answer is a new program called “Intensive Aftercare.”

Incarcerated, multi-problem juveniles arguably present the most challenging population for rehabilitation and transition to prosocial roles in our communities. In Colorado, the population assessed as being the highest risk-of-reoffense group had a recidivism (felony conviction within one year of release) rate of 70% prior to the implementation of the Colorado Intensive Aftercare Program.

This strong probability of future criminal activity by “high risk” juvenile delinquents forces the question of how public funds are spent in juvenile corrections. If reoffense is so likely, why should such juveniles be treated and released in conventional ways? The premise of the Intensive Aftercare Program is that high-risk juveniles require specialized strategies for treatment and phased transitional release. In this way the juvenile corrections system can responsibly address public safety and rehabilitation issues.

Colorado’s Division of Youth Corrections is sponsoring a site for experimental implementation of the Intensive Aftercare Program, funded by the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). The Intensive Aftercare Program is a model program developed by social researchers Dr. Troy Armstrong and Dr. David Altschuler. In the early 1980s Armstrong and Altschuler began a study of juvenile correctional transition practices around the country, later compiling research and theoretical work to create the IAP model in response to an OJJDP initiative. Eight states received training in 1992, and four sites were selected for pilot funding in 1994.

Colorado, Nevada, Virginia, and New Jersey are the four states selected for the federal initiative. OJJDP is funding experimental implementation over a three-year period that began in 1995. A separate initiative provided funding for independent evaluation research. The National Council of Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) is conducting the research on the project at all four states. It is hoped that the research period will be extended to allow for full implementation and follow-up data collection. The research design tracks services provided and the progress of both experimental and control youths.

The basic strategies of the IAP model (Altschuler & Armstrong, 1994) are:

- 1. Preparing youth for progressively increased responsibility and freedom in the community;**
- 2. Facilitating youth-community interaction and involvement;**
- 3. Working with both the offender and targeted community support systems (e.g. families, peers, schools, employers) on qualities needed for constructive interaction and the youth’s successful community adjustment;**
- 4. Developing new resources and supports where needed; and**
- 5. Monitoring and testing the youth and the community on their ability to deal with each other productively.**

To effectively implement these strategies, an overarching case management system must be put in place to include:

- 1. Assessment, classification, and selection criteria;**
- 2. Individual case planning incorporating a family and community perspective;**
- 3. A mix of intensive surveillance and services;**
- 4. A balance of incentives and graduated consequences coupled with the imposition of realistic, enforceable conditions; and**
- 5. Service brokerage with community resources and linkage with social networks.**

The Intensive Aftercare model requires several organizational features that were already part of Colorado's system. Standardized and validated assessment systems are necessary in order to sort out which individuals are most likely to reoffend and therefore have the most to gain from intensive interventions. Colorado had one of the first risk assessment instruments to be validated through a study of outcomes over several years of application. Risk and needs assessments and various forms of standardized testing are performed on all committed youths in Colorado. Case management that bridges from assessment to institutional care, and on through community transition and parole supervision is also a critical ingredient of the IAP formula. Colorado Division of Youth Corrections "client managers" are assigned cases at the time of commitment and retain case planning and supervision responsibilities through parole and discharge.

Lookout Mountain School, a state-operated facility in Golden, Colorado was selected as the site of study due to its proximity to the Denver metropolitan area and the types of juveniles placed there. Lookout Mountain is a secure, long-term residential treatment facility that accepts many of the highest risk and highest needs juveniles in the state's system. IAP researchers wanted to work with an agency willing to experiment in treatment strategies and provide specialized programming for a selected population of individuals. Because Lookout Mountain is close to the metropolitan area, it is easily accessible for visits from families, community based agencies, and other community representatives. To separate the IAP participants from other youths, the Cedar Unit was selected as the living unit for IAP youths.

The first stage of project planning involved top state officials in designing procedures and practices to adapt the program design to the Colorado site. A management group consisting of a program coordinator, two fulltime IAP case managers, the Division of Youth Corrections

Research Director, Lookout Mountain administrators, and Division of Youth Corrections regional directors began regular meetings to develop and implement the Colorado project.

The Youth Corrections research office collected recidivism data for a cohort of youths who had been placed at Lookout Mountain during a three-year period prior to the beginning of the IAP project. All of these juveniles had serious or chronic delinquent histories prior to placement at Lookout Mountain. Overall, about thirty-nine percent of these youths had a new felony conviction within one year following sentence expiration. Through the statistical method of regression analysis several variables were identified as being highly correlated with reoffense within this group. These items included young age at time of first adjudication, number of out-of-home placements, and living situation at time of commitment (single parent family weighed as the strongest risk factor). The third of the full group with the strongest risk characteristics in these areas had an average reoffense rate of 70%. A special risk assessment instrument was developed using these variables, and all youths referred to Lookout Mountain were given an "IAP risk score" by assessment clinicians at the time of referral. When juveniles were identified as "high-risk" on the IAP instrument, they were then randomized at NCCD (the IAP national research agency). "Experimental" subjects were assigned to one of the IAP client managers and placed into Cedar Cottage at Lookout Mountain. The "control" subjects were assigned to regular client managers and assigned to units other than Cedar. After finding that a number of youths with chronic psychiatric hospitalization histories were falling into the project pool, it was decided that the risk instrument would screen out such youths from consideration in the project.

It was agreed that IAP client managers would be limited to a maximum of 18 clients, with no more than 12 in the community at any time. This caseload is less than half of what other client managers are currently assigned. Two seasoned client managers volunteered for the special project duty. These individuals were given assignments in the general implementation and management of the program as well as case management tasks. The initial project was the development of standards and guidelines for program operations that would ensure implementation of the IAP model and maximum opportunity for effective interventions to the high-risk experimental group. Under the direction of the management team, a "service providers group" was formed, composed of representatives of Lookout Mountain, community-based residential and nonresidential providers, and the client managers. This group took on the work of brainstorming

Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University. This article and others can be found at www.rtc.pdx.edu For reprints or permission to reproduce articles at no charge, please contact the publications coordinator at 503.725.4175; fax at 503.725.4180 or e-mail rtcpubs@pdx.edu

intervention strategies to best implement the IAP model in Colorado.

The IAP researchers, primarily Troy Armstrong, provided technical assistance throughout each stage of implementation. The most challenging aspects in Colorado were the development of youth incentives, and implementing the experimental design. When the service provider group began to list creative treatment plans and sanctions, tremendous energy was unleashed within this group of talented and experienced treatment specialists. Private, community-based providers were very pleased to be asked to contribute ideas about case management and treatment in the state's correctional system, and institutional staff were likewise excited by having an opportunity to help design transition strategies. With little encouragement, the service provider group hammered out plans for "backing in" services to Lookout Mountain, and improving and linking treatment modalities. Development of a continuum of sanctions, from "progress staffings" to regression to secure placements came easily to the service provider group, because they shared a common background in community based corrections approaches to transition. When asked to list "incentives," however, they struggled. Dr. Armstrong suggested that at least three incentives should be listed for each sanction. This goal, combined with hands-on experience talking with clients about what would motivate them, moved the creative process along rapidly.

The most difficult implementation challenge has been in maintaining the experimental design. Like any other human service professionals, correctional workers want to provide the most innovative, highest quality services to all clients. Many roadblocks were encountered involving the need to distinguish the experience of the IAP clients from the control group. The management team intervened in a number of issues to ensure adequate separation and differential treatment that could allow the experimental design to work without compromising the correctional ethics of the agency. Strong support from the highest levels of the Division of Youth Corrections has motivated all the participants to find ways to see through the commitment that the agency had made to this important initiative.

"Dusty," the client mentioned above, was one of the first individuals identified in the experimental group. His client manager had the unique opportunity of working with his younger brother, who was sentenced to Youth Corrections shortly after Dusty, and who also qualified as an IAP experimental subject. Family strengths were explored early in the case planning process, and family therapy was an important ongoing component of the plan. Dusty's mother states that their relationship to the client

manager was the most important part of the experience. The project learned to enhance this supportive dynamic in several ways. First, the client manager used special visits as strong incentives for both boys. She arranged to take the older boy to see his brother while he was at the assessment center, an unusual and highly valued privilege. As an even more creative gesture, she was able to bring Dusty's family dog on to the Lookout Mountain campus for a unique "family" visit. This family also pioneered the experiential learning activity that has become standard procedure for celebrating the transition to community placement; a ropes "challenge course" on the Lookout Mountain campus.

The challenge course consists of a set of outdoor low and high physical activities designed to stimulate problem-solving and trust-building behaviors. With help from specially trained staff, Dusty's family members, client manager, and key members of his service provider team completed a challenge program together. This shared experience became the theme for discussions of transitional problems after Dusty's move to a community based residential program. The client manager explained that she often referred to the ropes course when discussing issues with Dusty and his mother, with statements like, "Remember, this is like the time when we needed to get Dusty across the high tightrope." The shared experience of prior shared stress in a controlled environment became a rich source of self-knowledge for these family members.

During Dusty's stay in the community he went to work for his grandfather in the welding business. With clear expectations and immediate feedback for his behaviors he made gradual progress toward his goals. He was forced to take small steps towards independence even when he believed he was ready for the big ones. As he learned his family trade and became a well-paid welder, he worked long hours at a shop on the far side of the metro area. He was denied permission to use forms of transportation other than the bus, and he was not excused from completing education and treatment assignments in addition his scheduled work time. To accommodate his own expectations and those of his transition program, he put in several months of very long, highly structured, and demanding days. A serious slip occurred one night when Dusty failed to return to the program at the required time. The client manager had to request the discretion of a local district attorney in holding back an escape charge. After this near crisis, the end of the sentence was soon reached, and Dusty moved on in a well-planned reentry to the community and freedom. Remarkably, he is now in the process of buying a home with savings he began to acquire during his community residential transition.

Not all stories will be like Dusty's. The project has seen some spectacular failures, as in the case of a boy who escaped over Lookout Mountain's security fence and was later involved in a vehicular chase, the shooting of a police officer, and an escape attempt from a county jail prior to sentencing into the adult system. While it is too early to measure the impacts of the program over time, **several observations are encouraging:**

- 1. Length of stay at Lookout Mountain is shorter for the experimental group.** Even though this is not a stated goal of the project, IAP clients are generally meeting established personal goals and transitioning more quickly than control subjects.
- 2. Families are reporting satisfaction with the treatment progress of their children and the important role of families in the IAP process.**
- 3. The Lookout Mountain Cedar Unit and other service providers report that much more consistent and comprehensive attention is given to the IAP boys, who show many signs of progress and maturity within the program's structure.**
- 4. The service provider group has produced some unanticipated benefits for the program.** Cross training activities and service provision by community-based programs within the institution have helped to create better service and communication systems. The positive energy released by combining these teams and recognizing

their efforts has helped improve staff morale and motivational levels.

- 5. Transition phase activities include escorted passes to programs, family, and community activities prior to release from Lookout Mountain.**
- 6. The experiential learning component is an effective rite of passage that defines the transition team and helps define relationships and expectations.**

Thanks to the long-term commitment of OJJDP, formal quantitative and qualitative research findings will be published over the next several years as an evaluation of the success of the IAP initiative.

DAVID B. BENNETT, *Regional Director, Department of Human Services, Division of Youth Corrections, Central Region, 4111 South Julian Way, Denver, Colorado 80236; (303) 762-4701 (voice); (303) 762-4718 (fax); email: david.bennett@state.co.us*

REFERENCE

Altschuler, D.M. & Armstrong, T.L. (1994). *Intensive Aftercare for High-Risk Juveniles: A Community Care Model. Program Summary*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, United States Department of Justice.