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Media Contact: Amy Webb

DHS Chief of Communications & Community Engagement

Amy.webb@dhs.arkansas.gov

Review of Residential Services for Youth in DYS Custody Identifies Strengths, Challenges

State reviewing recommendations, looking at ways to address issues in upcoming session and beyond

The Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS) Division of Youth Services (DYS) released the results of an independent review of its residential system for court-involved youth on Friday that showed the State has made some strides in recent years, but significantly more work is needed to make Arkansas a model system.

“We applaud DHS and the State of Arkansas for being willing to take a close look at its current residential programs for youth with the goal of providing the most effective services for young people and families,” said Center for Children’s Law and Policy Deputy Director Jason Szanyi, who helped with the review. “Our goal was to identify the State’s strengths and challenges and outline a path toward model systems we see in other states.”

DYS Director Betty Guhman said she appreciates the candid assessment of the residential system. The Division is already working to address many of the issues identified and will put a plan in place to handle other recommendations that fit with ongoing reform efforts.

“There are steps we as a State can take within the next year and within the next five years to considerably improve our residential treatment programs for youth in our care,” Guhman said. “It won’t be easy and it will take time, but we are committed to improving this system.”

The Center found that the strengths of the system include that DHS:

- Has prohibited abusive conditions and practices that exist in other state’s youth facilities,
- Operates some facilities that include more therapeutic, home-like settings than traditional large “youth prisons” found in other states,
- That DHS is part of a larger organization, DHS, which also includes divisions that focus on behavioral health. That helped DHS expand access to mental and behavioral health services for young people in residential placement, and
- Standardized youth’s educational experiences, assisted with credit recovery, and promoted educational achievement.

To conduct the review, the Center staff visited all eight of the State's residential juvenile treatment centers, reviewed data about DYS' youth population, and talked with staff and stakeholders. Challenges identified that prevent the State from having a truly effective and model residential program include:

- Contract performance measures that focus more on process than on youth outcomes,
- Preventable delays and system inefficiencies that cause youth to spend much longer in residential treatment,
- Long-standing problems with facility conditions and treatment of youth in certain facilities, and
- Inadequate oversight, monitoring, and support of DYS-operated and contracted facilities.

The Center concluded its review with 25 recommendations for actions the State could take in 12-24 months and two to five years. Some of the recommendations the State is working toward include:

- Assessing investing in a smaller number of facilities that hold the greatest potential to achieve meaningful rehabilitation,
- Eliminating delays in placement process,
- Structuring future procurements for staff-secure facilities to capitalize on available federal funding and ensure they include outcome-based performance measures,
- Establish standards on length of stay in residential treatment centers,
- Devoting additional resources and technical assistance to monitoring and oversight of facilities, and
- Making needed upgrades so that living environments are more conducive to rehabilitation and treatment.

"We recognize there is a lot of work still to do for the youth we serve," said DHS Deputy Director Keesa Smith. "This report, along with other assessments and input from judges and other stakeholders, will help us create a path forward that works with our youth, their families, and the State as a whole."