

Key Decision-Point: Residential Facilities

Questions to Ask about Out-of-Home Placements

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What should local decision-makers know about the out-of-home placements they use for young people?

Most decisions to confine delinquent youth in treatment or correctional facilities are made at the local level. Confinement facilities are sometimes operated by the court or the probation department, but usually the state, another governmental entity, or a contracted private provider is directly responsible for their operation. Facility types may include group homes, residential treatment centers, camps, secure facilities or training schools. Even when youth are confined in facilities not directly operated by the court or the probation department, local stakeholders (i.e., judges, probation officers, and other local practitioners) should still hold themselves accountable for knowing some essential facts about the facilities to which they have entrusted youth. Not only should confinement facilities prohibit harmful practices in the care and treatment of youth, but they should also embrace best practices for ensuring safe facilities that maximize positive youth outcomes.

Below is a list of questions that all local decision-makers should be able to answer about youth in out-of-home placement facilities.

General

Which youth are currently confined in secure placement facilities? In which facility is each youth housed? What was the date of his/her confinement?

Facility Information

- What is the address and phone number for the facility? What is the Facility Superintendent's name?
- Does the facility hold only justice-involved youth? What is the average daily population?
- Does the facility also hold youth involved in the child welfare system? What is the average daily population?
- What is the average length of stay for a justice-involved youth?

Service/Treatment Planning

- How often do facility staff meet to develop the plan for a youth's services/treatment in the facility and upon release? How often do staff meet to assess progress toward the plan's goals?
- Are staff from local agencies (e.g., probation, case managers) invited to attend service/treatment planning meetings at the facility?
- At what point do the professionals who will oversee the youth's reintegration to the community become involved with the youth?
- Are families invited to attend service/treatment planning meetings at the facility?

Education

- Each day, do youth receive the number of minutes of school that is required by state law?
- Does the facility have a special education program with appropriately licensed professionals?
- Do youth earn credit that is transferable to local schools upon release?

Physical and Behavioral Health

- Does the facility have a medical clinic? Is it staffed 24-hours per day?
- Does the facility have licensed mental health clinicians to treat youth with mental health disorders and/or substance abuse problems? How often do they provide services?
- Does the facility house youth on psychotropic medications? How often does a psychiatrist provide services to the facility?

Behavior Management

- Aside from school, what programs/groups/activities are available at the facility?
- During how many hours per weekday/weekend day are youth involved in a structured activity led by an adult? How many hours of free/unstructured time do youth have per weekday/weekend day?
- Does the facility use a point-level/incentive system to manage youth's behavior?
- Approximately how often do fights occur at the facility (e.g., multiple times a day, daily, weekly, monthly)?
- Approximately how often are physical restraints used at the facility (e.g., multiple times a day, daily, weekly, monthly)?
 - Does the facility permit the use of chemical restraints (e.g., OC spray, pepper spray)?
 - Does the facility permit the use of a restraint chair or restraint bed?
- What sanctions are used to respond to youth misconduct? (e.g., activity/program restriction, loss of privileges, community service, extended stay, etc.)
 - Does the facility permit the use of disciplinary isolation (i.e., time in isolation imposed as a sanction for a rule violation)?
 - What is the maximum length of stay in isolation permitted by policy?

Community Connections

- Does the facility offer volunteer-led programming? (e.g., recreational, 12-step, religious, etc.)
- Are any of these volunteers connected to organizations from your local community?
- Do these programs operate every day? Only on weekends?
- How often are families allowed to visit? Who is included in the definition of "family"?
- Are youth allowed to participate in off-campus activities?

Youth Information

- How long has the youth been in custody? When is the anticipated release date?
- What grade is the youth in? Is he/she expected to graduate or obtain a GED while in custody?
- Is the youth on the mental health caseload? How often does he/she meet with a clinician? Is the youth making progress toward his/her treatment goals?
- What behavior management stage/phase/level has the youth achieved? Has progress toward the higher levels been steady? If not, what gets in the way?
- Does the youth have any on-going physical health needs? Is he/she receiving treatment?
- Has the youth's family visited in the past 90 days? How often? What are the barriers to more frequent visitation?
- Has the local professional who will oversee the youth's aftercare visited with the youth? If not, why not?
- What are the youth's reintegration plans (e.g., living situation, school/job, continued treatment, involvement with community programs)?