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## Better choices for troubled teens

### Ohio youths get early help from community-based intervention program



THOMAS LEVINSON | DISPATCH

Jason Kelly, right center, has his final visit with his Maryhaven counselor Tiffany Reed, second from left, at the home of Patrick and Becky Kelly, his aunt and uncle, in foreground. At center is his Franklin County caseworker, Michael Johnson.

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An expressive 16-year-old sat at his kitchen table chatting easily with a counselor about school and sports. Yet just a few months ago, such social interaction was tough for him.

Jason Kelly eagerly talked with his aunt, uncle and a counselor from Maryhaven's substance-abuse program, proudly noting his improving grades.

Lighthouses decorate the tidy dining area in their East Side Columbus home — watercolors on a wallpaper border, a lighthouse figurine on the kitchen counter. They signify hope, as a Thomas Kinkade painting of the light beacons set atop rocky terrain points out.

The word *hope* is engraved in a gold plate near the bottom of the frame, below the Bible verse John 1:5 — “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Less than a year ago, Jason was heavily into marijuana, pain pills and alcohol. His high-school grades were far from his mind. He was coping with the loss of his father, who was shot and killed by police during an attempted theft on Jan. 6, 2012. Jason and his younger brother were skipping school, and authorities eventually picked them up for truancy.

“I lost something that was very important to me, and I just didn't care,” Jason said. “But now I have to care.”

It's what his father would want, he said.

Like thousands of other young people in Ohio, Jason was ordered by a court to participate in a community-based treatment program.

During the past several years, the state has increasingly favored treating kids near their homes rather than sending them to youth prisons. An initiative called RECLAIM Ohio, as well as the Youth Services Grant, help fund these community-based programs, and Ohio's model is cited as a national standard for juvenile justice reform.

Part of the wider reform initiative is treating youth before they commit crimes that make them too dangerous to keep in their communities.

Jason has responded well to treatment. He passes his drug tests and goes to school. He moved in with his aunt and uncle — Patrick and Becky Kelly, both 38 years old — in September after leaving residential treatment, and they say he does what he is asked and has opened up to them more. “We want to let him be a kid, which he wasn't doing before,” Patrick Kelly said. “He had to grow up, take care of his brother.” Counseling extended to the family as well, his aunt said. “The counselors have helped us deal with it, too,” Becky Kelly said. “They taught us how to discipline.” And the effort has paid off.

“I'm different. I've changed,” Jason said. “I'm trying to do something with my life.”

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### **Redirection comes early**

Early intervention could lessen the chance of a teen reoffending, said Paul H. Coleman, president and CEO of Maryhaven, a Columbus addiction treatment center.

“If a juvenile is arrested for something that is non-violent, sometimes that juvenile will go into the justice system if there is no other place to place him or her,” Coleman said.

“What the (county Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health) board and the court are working on is trying to intervene right away with that non-violent offender.”

Juvenile-justice philosophy in the United States is shifting away from the “lock ‘em up” mentality of past decades. The state’s juvenile correctional facilities are now the end of the line for those who can’t be rehabilitated close to home, Ohio Department of Youth Services officials said.

Mental-health experts say community-based treatment programs are ideal for rehabilitating young offenders. “You’re really giving services where they belong, closer to family and closer to home, so that we’re not sending kids off to an institution and not having anything done back home to help them integrate back into the community,” said F. Edward Sparks, president of the Juvenile Justice Coalition, an Ohio organization that promotes community-based alternatives to incarceration. “With RECLAIM, the youth are kept locally, which is really what we want to see happen.”

The state launched RECLAIM Ohio, which stands for Reasonable and Equitable Community and Local Alternatives to the Incarceration of Minors, in 1994. The initiative rewards courts that divert felony offenders from juvenile correctional facilities.

While the Youth Services Grant is a flat rate, the RECLAIM funding works as an incentive program for the courts.

According to the Ohio Department of Youth Services’ website, “each court is given a number of ‘credits’ based on the court’s four-year average of (youth felony offenders). Those credits are reduced by one credit for each chargeable (juvenile correctional facility) bed day used during the previous year.”

The state does not reduce a court’s RECLAIM funding for “public safety” bed days, which include cases of murder, kidnapping and rape.

Funds from the Youth Services Grant aren’t tied solely to youth who commit felonies, and each juvenile court gets a flat \$50,000 per year. Additional funding may be awarded on a per capita basis to counties with a population greater than 25,000. RECLAIM Ohio dollars combined with the Youth Services Grant create the Department of Youth Services’ total Subsidy Grant.

Much of the effort has involved early intervention for at-risk youth — 42 percent of youth admitted to Subsidy Grant programming in fiscal year 2011 were “non-offenders,” meaning they have not been adjudicated for an offense. Felony offenders, who are eligible for commitment to a youth prison, made up 14 percent of those participating in Subsidy Grant

programs that same year.

### **Other states take note**

Measuring the success of the community-treatment programs with data is difficult. The state doesn't track the number of youth who end up back in court each year after completing community-based treatment. But the program is widely heralded as a model for other states.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit research institute, released a report in 2009 about applying lessons from RECLAIM Ohio to Texas. The report notes that "the incarceration of youth can often lead to detrimental effects," and points to the reduced number of youth committed to juvenile correctional facilities in Ohio.

The Georgia Special Council on Criminal Justice Reform plans to recommend statewide juvenile-justice reform similar to what Ohio has done with its community programs.

Will Harrell, a court-appointed monitor who regularly visits the state's Scioto Juvenile Correctional Facility in Delaware as part of a federal class-action lawsuit, praised community-treatment programs as a preferred alternative to youth prisons.

"RECLAIM is the national model, the standard other states are deliberating," he said. "Everybody is talking about and looking at Ohio."

The state keeps tabs on programs by sending monitors to the counties each year to check on operations.

The fiscal year 2012 monitoring report for Franklin County Subsidy Grant programs is mostly positive. Most of the youth who were interviewed said the programs helped them:

- A teen involved in sex-offender programming said he had a good relationship with his counselors and was able to open up about his history of being abused. He said the program helped him learn how to control his anger.
- A youthful offender participating in Maryhaven's substance-abuse program said it has helped him remain drug free and set goals about maintaining good grades and playing basketball for his school.
- The mother of a teen enrolled in a home-based family-preservation program said meeting regularly with a counselor has improved her communication skills as a parent and taught her how to follow through with consequences for her son.

Lorenzo Sanchez, a Franklin County juvenile-court magistrate, said he has seen many successes with community-based treatment.

"Our ultimate goal is to keep juveniles from coming back (to court)," he said. "I can probably name more cases of success than failure."

### **Counting proves tricky**

It's difficult to track the youth who participate in the community programs because they can be enrolled in multiple programs at once or in the same program multiple times in one year. The Department of Youth

Services, which administers the Subsidy Grant dollars, doesn't regularly track the number of kids who end up back in court after finishing the program to which they were assigned.

"A kid might go into five different programs simultaneously," said Ryan Gies, the department's deputy director for the Division of Courts and Community Services.

"So you can count that, but you can't necessarily disaggregate (and determine) that's the same kid five times without a big research project."

The most recent recidivism numbers are from 2005, when the University of Cincinnati completed a study on RECLAIM. A report from the department cites a 20 percent recidivism rate over a 3 1/2-year period for youth involved in RECLAIM programming.

Counting toward that recidivism rate are: new juvenile felony adjudications, admission into the adult prison system's offender community supervision database and incarceration in an adult or youth prison.

Of those released from youth prisons in Ohio, about half are re-incarcerated within three years.

The Department of Youth Services is now waiting on the results of another University of Cincinnati recidivism study. The evaluation should be completed by spring or summer.

In fiscal year 2011, the statewide successful completion rate was 84 percent. Courts report the completion rate for each program to the Department of Youth Services.

Data from the department show 110,528 program admissions for fiscal year 2011. For that same year, drug testing accounted for the biggest share of program admissions — 25,860, or 23.4 percent. But each drug test can be counted as a new admission, and some youth are tested biweekly or monthly while they're in treatment.

It's also hard to say how many youth are enrolled in Subsidy Grant programs, because the state counts admissions, not individuals. So if a youth is on probation and in another treatment program at the same time, he or she would be counted twice.

It's up to the juvenile courts and the program administrators to track the kids participating in the programs.

"We inform the court of which youth don't complete the program," said Coleman, of Maryhaven. "There isn't any questions that the courts are going to know who were successful and who weren't." Toward the end of his meeting with the Maryhaven counselor, Jason Kelly recited a list of goals he has accomplished. Be more honest and truthful, offer to help others with homework, go to church. He ticks these off with a pencil as he moves down the list. As for dealing with his past, he says: "I cope with it and just keep pushing."

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