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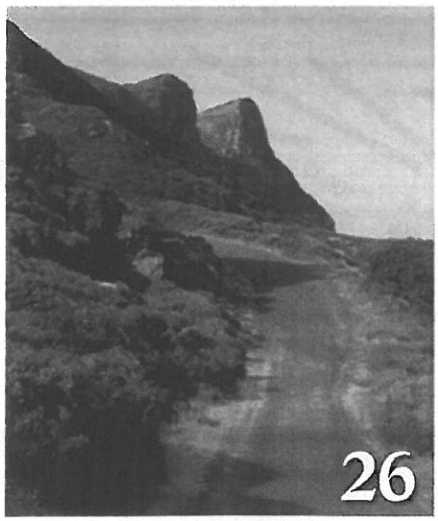
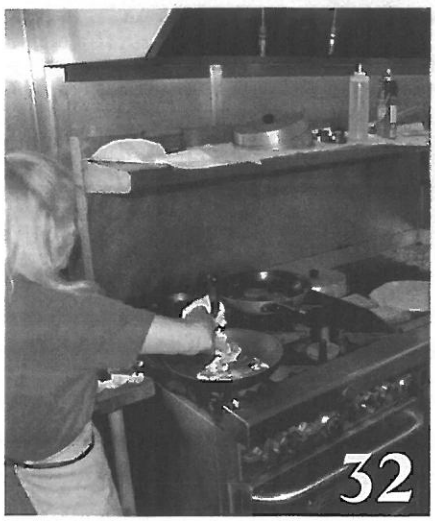
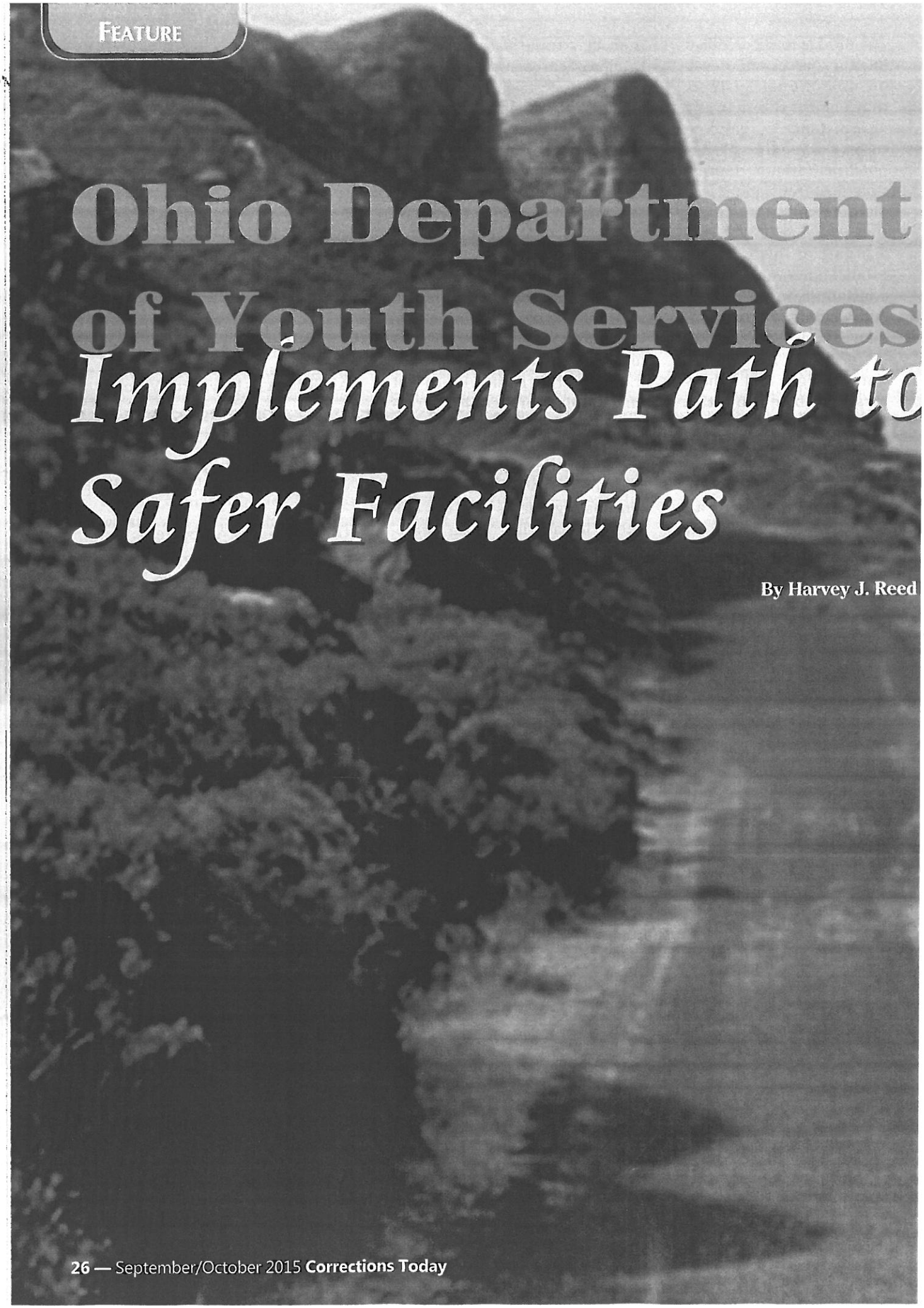






Ohio Department of Youth Services Implements Path to Safer Facilities

By Harvey J. Reed

Rising Tension

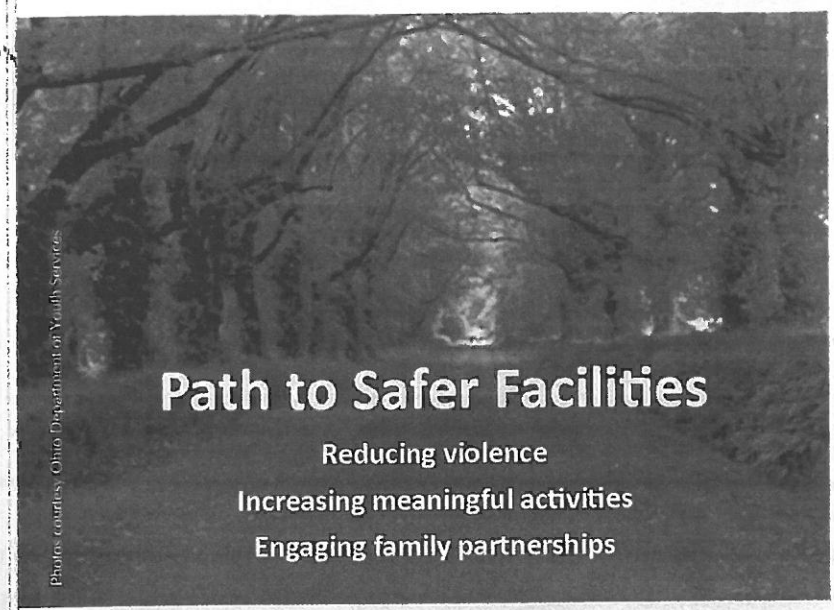
Over the last several years, one of the most controversial practices in both adult and youth corrections has been the use of restrictive housing. Increasing pressure has led correctional systems to take a hard look at the use of restrictive housing, otherwise known as solitary confinement, seclusion, isolation, "the box," "the hole" and room confinement. The Ohio Department of Youth Services (ODYS) certainly had a spotlight shining on its practices, due to pressure from court-appointed monitors and advocacy groups. Similarly, the educational system's use of seclusion rooms came under scrutiny. Headlines about Ohio's practices included "Feds Seek Court Order Stopping Ohio from Secluding Juvenile Inmates with Psychological Issues," "What Ohio Has Been Doing to Mentally Ill Boys" and "If Parents Did This They'd Be Arrested." While these external influences were taken into consideration, none of them brought more attention to the matter than the department's own data regarding restrictive housing. It showed that as restrictive housing hours increased throughout the agency, so did the rate of violent acts committed by youths. From 2008 to 2013, the use of seclusion at ODYS was on the rise. According to ODYS data, acts of violence by youths also increased over the same time period by 54 percent. Another key discovery was that, on average, only about 15 percent of all youths were committing acts of violence. It became the goal to target the violence of this small portion of youths in a productive manner that would lead to positive results.

The problem with restrictive housing is that it does not make facilities safer. It does not prevent violence or reduce assaults on staff and youths; instead, as indicated by the department's data, it actually increases violence. Youths learn little from time in solitude and are less able to develop, mature or learn new skills for problem solving while in restrictive housing. This practice also makes it difficult for staff to provide meaningful treatment and education. Seclusion has been found to deteriorate a youth's mental health and overall well-being. There is a tendency in many isolated youths to desire revenge and act out in anger. Placing youths in restrictive housing compromises the trust that has been built with staff and damages their positive relationships. In many cases, solitude retraumatizes youths. As would be expected with increasing violence, the climate of ODYS facilities also suffered. Staff feared for their safety. Absenteeism resulted in increased mandated overtime. Morale began to suffer and staff turnover increased. All of this, in turn, perpetuated the challenge of youth violence.

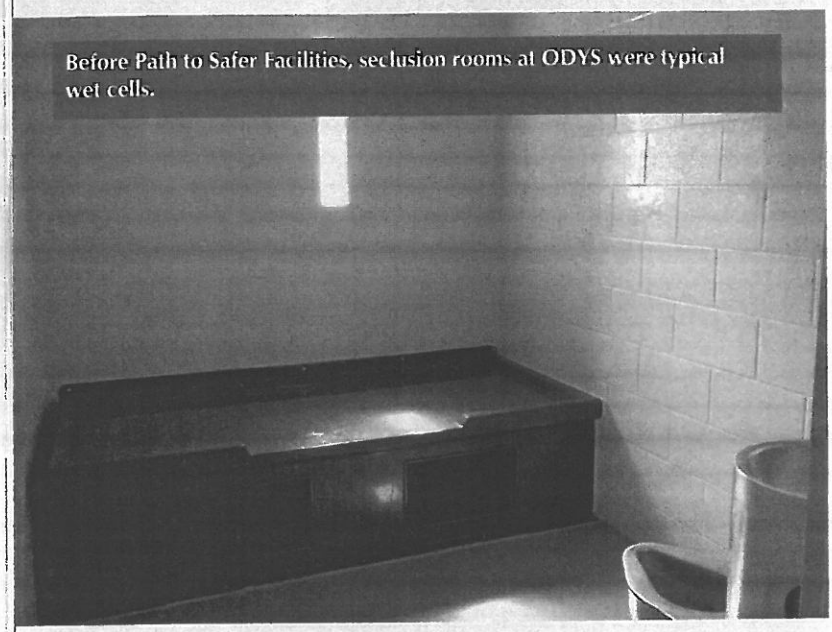
Introducing Path to Safer Facilities

In 2014, ODYS implemented Path to Safer Facilities, a program designed to increase preventative measures, enhance meaningful activities for youths, revise intervention strategies to hold youths accountable and move away from the use of restrictive housing as a punishment. The agency became focused on helping youths learn to be responsible through consequences that focus on true accountability, such as requiring youths to share an apology with a group. ODYS created goals for the program using feedback received from staff at cultural assessments, site visits and countless conversations. These included making facilities safer, reducing assaults on staff and youths, preventing violence, helping youths develop and mature, teaching youths skills for problem solving and providing treatment and education. A key part of Path to Safer Facilities is finding the right balance between programming and security, because the two work hand-in-hand. With good programming in place, safety improves. When safety improves, staff feel better about their work. Path to Safer Facilities was designed to prevent boredom and troublesome behavior by keeping youths engaged in healthy activities while teaching them new skills.

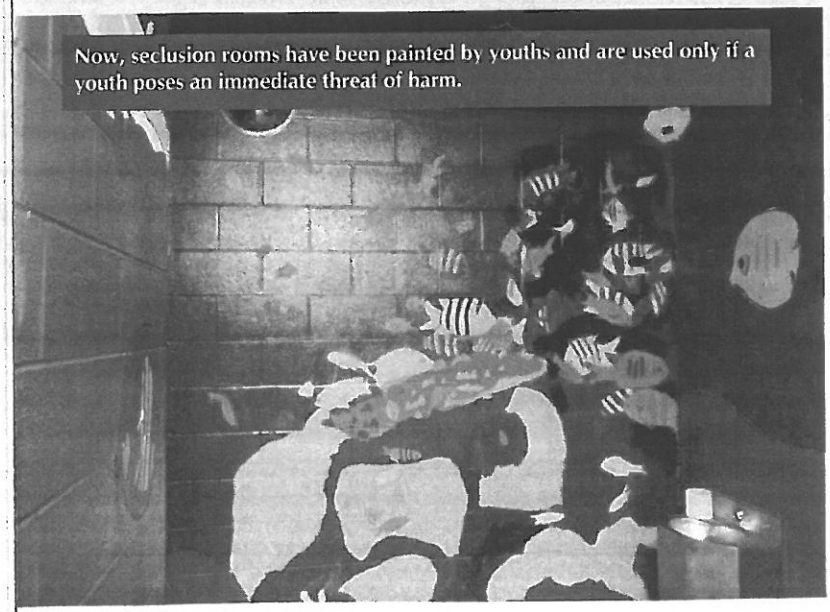
As the program rolled out, emphasis was given to training staff, delivering effective treatment and services to youths, rewarding and recognizing positive behavior, increasing meaningful programs and activities, building relationships between youths and staff, engaging families and increasing accountability of youths. Staff were encouraged to find creative ways to hold youths responsible for their actions, which would result in learning and compensation for any harm done.



Photos courtesy Ohio Department of Youth Services



Before Path to Safer Facilities, seclusion rooms at ODYS were typical wet cells.



Now, seclusion rooms have been painted by youths and are used only if a youth poses an immediate threat of harm.

Supporting Staff

The staff training focused on enhancing ways to effectively manage youths. Because of this, unit management was strengthened, and a unit management summit provided opportunities to support staff. It also emphasized effective reentry, management of gang activity, the provision of meaningful programs, understanding of leadership styles and problem solving. Unit managers were tasked with being "go-to leaders" to ensure that staff are held accountable, groups are being formed, interdisciplinary teams are effective and youths receive what they need to succeed.

In addition to training staff, Path to Safer Facilities supports them. Staff are the most important resource of any correctional system, and it is critical for the members to be healthy in order for youths to get healthy. The agency rolled out the Critical Incident Stress Management program to support staff when they experience trauma; Peer Assistance to help staff with personal issues; and Desert Waters™, which is designed to improve culture by addressing correctional fatigue through awareness, validation and a variety of tools. An agency-wide employee recognition program was also revitalized, with designated youth specialists and employees of the year. ODYS has also been working to improve staff retention, using diverse committees to improve the hiring and onboarding process from top to bottom.

Prevention

Path to Safer Facilities emphasizes preventing violent behavior from occurring. Staff from all disciplines worked hard to boost youth activities, and educational opportunities were expanded with the addition of apprenticeships. Thanks to collaboration with the Children's Defense Fund of Ohio, Freedom Schools are offered in all facilities to supplement the existing educational curriculum and promote a love of reading. "Freedom Schools allow youths to increase their reading levels by utilizing cheers, chants and team building exercises to create a high-energy learning environment," said Cornelius Lawrence, site coordinator of Freedom Schools at Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility. The day begins with Harambee, a Swahili word that means "let's pull together." During the activity, the group sings, talks about aspirations and listens to guests read out loud. Since the program was launched at ODYS in July 2014, a total of 129 youths have completed the six-week voluntary program. In partnership with the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, ODYS began O.N.E.-Stop Programs (Offender Network for Employment to Stop Recidivism) inside the facilities to provide youth graduates with access

"When youths in juvenile facilities are acting out, many people are quick to ask what is wrong with them. We are shifting our approach from asking what is wrong with them to understanding what happened to them."

to focused employment, training and support services. Other additions have included gardening, mediation, mentoring and leadership-focused programs for youths who have already graduated from school. One facility has piloted a reorganization plan to strategically house youths in order to prevent violence. Rather than place the most challenging youths together in one unit, the facility has grouped youths according to Ohio Youth Assessment System risk levels. Not only does this prevent low-risk youths from reoffending by learning from high-risk youths, but also, the youths are experiencing more permanency in units and with staff, leading to richer rapport and therapeutic bonds. Pending further evaluation, this practice will be implemented systemwide.

Holding Youths Accountable

The facilities now conduct a daily review of incidents with a variety of staff to focus on solutions. When acts of violence occur, treatment teams meet to review the incident and address the behavior that occurred. Youths are then engaged in intensive treatment sessions with the goal of resolving the incident. In addition, mediation provides the tools necessary to solve conflict in a nonviolent manner. According to Ken Haldeman, a youth specialist at Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility, Path to Safer Facilities is "moving in the right direction." He stressed youth accountability, saying, "Not giving something to a youth who didn't earn it is the key," and explained that accountability and follow-through are critical.

Restrictive housing, when used as punishment, does not teach responsibility; it does not involve learning, and it puts the youth into a passive role instead of an active role. Youths are more likely to learn when they are engaged and required to make restitution for their misbehavior. By utilizing incentives for positive behavior, staff require youths to take an active role in their misbehavior. Examples of the ways ODYS staff hold youths accountable are:

- Taking away the youth's incentives when positive behavior does not occur;
- Requiring youths to complete meaningful writing assignments that help them connect their undesired behaviors to desired behaviors;
- Prohibiting youths from participating in extracurricular activities;
- Requiring a youth to share an apology with a group;
- Presenting on a particular topic that is relevant to the misbehavior;
- Ensuring that youths "make their day" before receiving incentives; and
- Ensuring that youths are "in good standing" in order to participate in desirable activities.

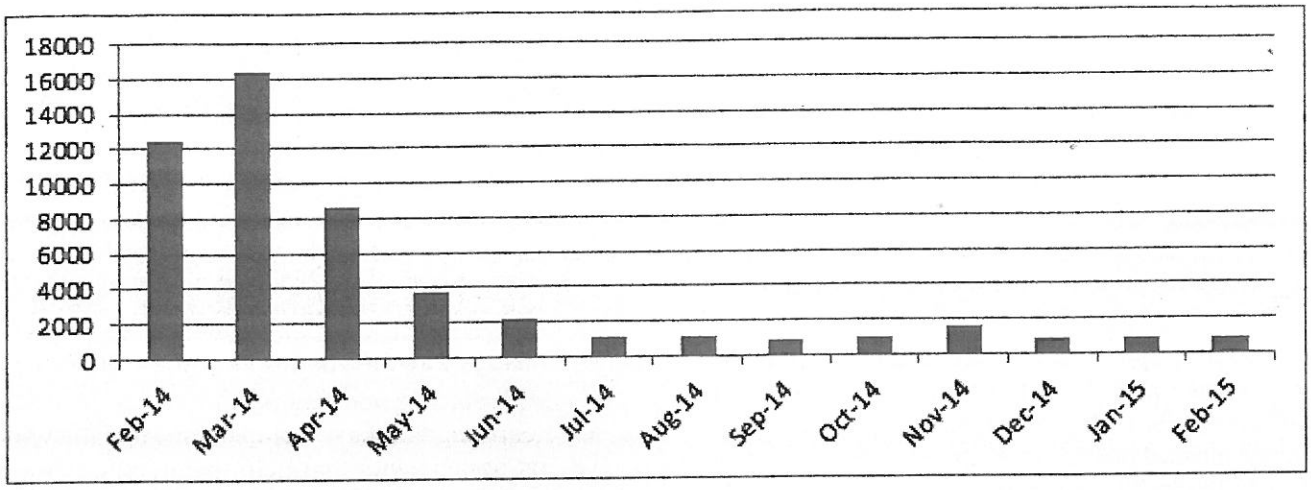
Steven Schuster, a social studies and psychology teacher at Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility, put it this way: "Hold to your own standards. Stick to your guns. The rest will fall into place. If you give in, you lose control."

Meaningful activities and incentives are also valuable tools. Jessica Jefferson, a social worker at Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility, stresses the importance of understanding incentives that mean the most to youths. "If you have something for them to do, something that they really love, that's the key," she said. "I believe in giving them a lot and taking it away when they get write-ups." Examples of these incentives include fun evening activities, arts-and-crafts privileges and extra phone calls. By requiring accountability and youth response, the agency is instilling responsibility and preparing youths for a more successful future.

Engaging Family Partnerships

Path to Safer Facilities recognizes that family involvement is a critical key in helping a young person get on the right track. ODYS is committed to keeping families informed and sharing solutions and challenges that impact youths' successes. Efforts have been enhanced by increasing family visitation to seven days a week at two of the facilities. Superintendents now call families during a youth's first

Graph 1. Monthly Comparison of Seclusion Hours at ODYS



week at the facility to facilitate and encourage family involvement and answer any questions from family members. Superintendents let families know about ways to participate in a youth's treatment as well as services offered for families, including video communication and CLOSE (Connecting Loved Ones Sooner than Expected) to Home, a free, monthly bus service. Facility tours are now offered to family members. Virtual tour videos, available at www.youtube.com/user/OhioDYS, allow families to catch a glimpse of facilities on their computers or smartphones.

In addition, two facilities now use the Baby Elmo Program, a parenting and structured visitation program used to build bonds between children and their incarcerated teen fathers. It focuses on hands-on learning and relationship building between the teen and his child, rather than just talking about parenting. The program includes parent-child visits, providing increased opportunity for contact between young fathers and their children. The participating young men have shown improved behavior.

Addressing Trauma

Research shows that approximately 34 percent of children in the U.S. have experienced at least one traumatic event. However, according to an online article posted by the Justice Policy Institute titled "Healing Invisible Wounds: Why Investing in Trauma-Informed Care for Children Makes Sense," between 75 and 93 percent of youths entering the juvenile justice system are estimated to have experienced some degree of trauma. Traumatic experiences — such as physical abuse, neglect, loss of a caregiver or witnessing violence — can have devastating and long-lasting effects, leading to aggressive behaviors, difficulty learning in school, sleeping and eating disorders and lack of self-confidence. Path to Safer Facilities considers the importance of addressing past trauma. "The youths who have experienced trauma cannot be overlooked," said Dr. Bob Stinson, chief of behavioral health services at ODYS. "When youths in juvenile facilities are acting out, many people are quick to ask what is wrong with them. We are shifting our approach from asking what is wrong with them to understanding what happened to them." During intake, a youth assessment is conducted to determine if they have encountered traumatic experiences. ODYS is currently in the process of implementing trauma-informed care training to all staff so they can understand trauma and identify the steps that can be taken to treat it. "Addressing trauma is now the expectation, not the exception," said Ginine Trim, deputy director of facility programs and operations at ODYS. "In order for us to be successful, we must ensure that our employees are provided the resources and support to assist them in working with youths that present challenging behaviors."

Safe to Release Process

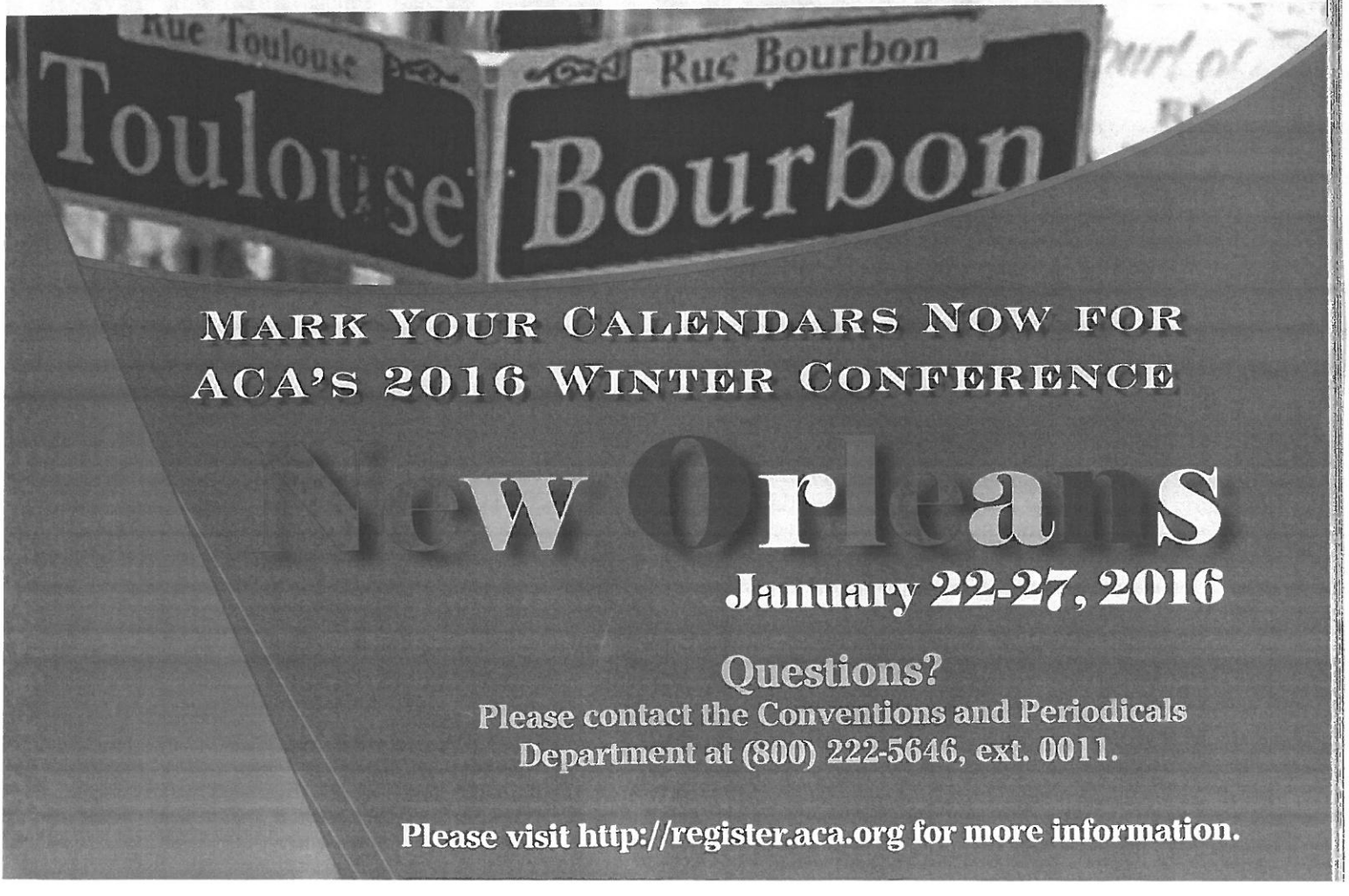
While Path to Safer Facilities has provided the framework to abolish the use of disciplinary seclusion, temporary restrictive housing is used whenever a youth poses an immediate threat of harm to self or others. ODYS uses a "safe to release" process to return youths to the general population as soon as it is safe to do so. An improved interview process with youths who have been temporarily secluded is used to assess their behavior in order to make an informed decision about placement. Whenever possible, the behavioral health staff, the youth's social worker and the unit manager work together during the process. In addition, with help from youths' ideas and artistic talents, the restrictive housing rooms were given a new look: murals painted by youths now provide a stimulating environment that is a better motivator for change.

Path to Safer Facilities Leads to Safer Communities

In one year's time, Path to Safer Facilities has resulted in a dramatic decrease in the use of restrictive housing. In February 2014, there were more than 12,000 hours of seclusion time; in February 2015, the time was down to just under 900 hours. Acts of violence have also decreased, from 193 incidents during the first six months of 2014 to 158 incidents during the following six months.

ODYS now has an office of quality assurance and improvement to ensure that a positive culture is provided for youths and staff by improving processes, procedures and outcomes through transparency, data reporting, accountability and continuous improvement. Staff have been trained to scrutinize data and use it to make better decisions. Monthly conference calls with both facility and central office leadership provide a forum to review the past month's data indicators, plan for improvements and share best practices from site to site.

The agency's Path to Safer Facilities has expanded to communities. While it is desirable for youths to do well during their stay at ODYS, it is even more critical that they succeed when returned to their communities. The department is concentrating on preparing youths for a lifetime of success through heightened reentry efforts, with the goal of every youth leaving the facilities with a solid plan to complete education and/or secure employment. This can be accomplished only by all of the staff working together — as well as embracing families and communities — to provide youths with services and support for successful reintegration into the community. As a result, recidivism will be reduced, and communities will be safer.

To find out more, visit the ODYS website at www.dys.ohio.gov and click on "Inside DYS" and then "Path to Safer Facilities."

Harvey J. Reed is the director of the Ohio Department of Youth Services.