Alameda County Probation Department Succeeds in Reducing Both Out-of-Home Placements, Racial Disparities

By Danielle Soto | October 10, 2018

There is important new evidence that reducing out-of-home placements — while also reducing disparities for racial and ethnic minorities — is an achievable goal for the juvenile justice system. The removal of minors from their home, ostensibly for their rehabilitation, often results in additional difficulties in their schooling, future employment and overall well-being — especially if the placements exceed six months. When a youth is placed out of home, it can also be disruptive and detrimental to the entire family.

That's why in California, the Alameda County Probation Department decided to make a concerted effort to reduce the number of youth placed out-of-home.

The data show the new approach worked, with encouraging lessons for other jurisdictions. A 2018 report shows that over a three-year period, the department achieved huge results, reducing the number of youth placed out-of-home by 78 percent. And just as notably, it bucked national trends by lowering the rates of black and Latino youth in out-of-home placements throughout the county. Through a
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concerted effort to reduce not only overall numbers, but also racial/ethnic disparities, Alameda County achieved more equitable outcomes across the board.

The report, "Reducing Out-of-Home Placements in Alameda County ofcials ascribe the success to a clear focus on changing outcomes. “The Alameda County Probation Department is committed to improving outcomes for youth and providing them with the best opportunities for success,” said Wendy Still, chief probation officer. “The findings of this report show clear evidence of the priority our department has placed on reducing the overuse of out-of-home placement and addressing racial and ethnic disparity. While the results of this report are very encouraging, we remain committed to increasing the success of at-risk youth by providing them access to wraparound services, services from community-based partners and the use of evidence-based practices.”

These marked improvements resulted from major shifts in the department’s priorities. This rethink stemmed from both changes in state laws and research that shows out-of-home placements lasting longer than six months are detrimental to youth. Specifically, the department’s major changes included:

- increased trainings and staff meetings focused on the changes in policy and practice, and educating officers and staff on research demonstrating the importance of limiting out-of-home placements and the amount of time spent in those placements;
providing wraparound services and services to the entire family; and
improved collaboration with outside entities such as community-based organizations and school districts.

The probation department recognized early on that this had to be a team effort. The entire department was proactive in their desire to make deep changes, from the leadership to rank-and-file probation officers. And the collaboration extended well beyond that, to the community and allied organizations and researchers like us. We hope this encouraging initiative serves as a national model for probation departments in starting to turn these numbers around — in a way that benefits all youth equally.

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