

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY PROBATION DEPARTMENT'S  
SANTA MARIA JUVENILE HALL TRUST UNIT

**Overview** – Provide a brief, 25-word summary of your program or project.

The Probation Department's Santa Maria Juvenile Hall (SMJH) Trust Unit promotes personal growth, positive behavior change and long-term success for youth at high risk for recidivism.

**Challenge** – Describe the challenge your County faced and the process used to address it. Explain the unique or critical factors that led to this project.

Juvenile justice systems are continuing to evolve in response to research in the areas of adolescent brain development and in identifying opportunities to harness the benefits of comprehensive approaches in Positive Youth Development (PYD). PYD is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes. The integration of a PYD model within a juvenile hall setting can be challenging and presents a fundamental shift in culture and approach from the historical framework of compliance and consequence, to one that builds a youth's strengths and assets through incentives and achievement. The Trust Unit's framework and focus was derived and driven by the fundamental aspects of PYD, those of competence, confidence, connection, caring/compassion and character.

**Solution** – Describe the innovative steps taken by the County to solve the problem or overcome the challenge outlined above.

On January 12, 2020, SMJH launched the Trust Unit. The program design process was a collaborative process, receiving input from probation staff, program, partners, educators, and the youth themselves. Although SMJH is a newer facility, it can have a sterile "institutions" feel. While many aspects of the daily structure of the facility remain security oriented, unlike the traditional units, the Trust Unit is designed to have an open, home-like environment with increased amenities and privileges and appropriately reduced restrictions. To help instill responsibility and buy-in, the youth apply by completing an application and make a presentation to the Trust Unit Committee. In partnership with stakeholders, the Committee includes a counselor, school personnel, and probation staff who review the youth's application and the youth is either accepted into the Trust Unit, or is mentored for future acceptance into the Unit. All youth in the facility are eligible, including those awaiting transportation to the Department of Juvenile Justice or those whose cases are being heard in adult court.

Once in the Trust Unit, youth participate in meaningful activities designed to develop their competence and confidence, their strength and talents all while allowing youth to connect with caring and supportive staff mentors and other supportive adults. Youth in the unit can move freely throughout the unit, enjoy increased time to call family, showers without time constraints, access to video games and of course opportunities to enjoy some of their favorite food.

**Innovation** – Describe how this program is innovative among California Counties. Show how your solution demonstrates creativity, uniqueness and an innovative spirit.

As a result of the population decline of juvenile detention facilities through juvenile justice reform and other legislative initiatives, Probation Departments throughout the State are encountering historical lows in terms of booking and detentions. This has resulted in a surplus of space that has provided a variety of opportunities for repurposing and/or enhanced service delivery.

While repurposing a juvenile facility is not uncommon, the way the Trust Unit was outfitted and programmatically operates is. The Trust Unit is unique not simply because of the home-like environment

created to surround the youth in an atmosphere supportive of engagement (couches, large screen television, area rugs, flowers and shrubbery, pastel painted rooms and personal blankets) but also in the approach staff take with the youth. The program approach is grounded in the elements of trauma informed care, including personal safety and choice, collaboration, trustworthiness and empowerment. Whereas rehabilitation and recidivism reduction remains its primary goal, the methodology and approach to achieve these goals have evolved. Building on brain science and evidence-based practices, the program puts into practice a PYD framework that develops youth strengths and builds resilience through meaningful interactions to develop youth self-esteem and confidence. The Trust Unit's innovation is in the engagement of youth in the design and their ongoing input on improvements, and in providing the opportunity to reduce their stress and manage anxieties within the structure of an "institution." Recognizing that youth in our care are not defined by their crime classifications, their family histories or their gang affiliation. They are adolescents that are still developing physically, physiologically, emotional and intellectually, to which we have the opportunity to *positively influence* their transition to young adults.

**Results** – Describe the results of the program/project.

Early results from the Trust Unit have been positive. Since its opening in January 2020, 22 youth have been accepted into the unit. Of those, 16 have left the unit without any disciplinary incidents, including 10 youth who returned to their home in the community. Of those 10 youth, 9 have not committed any new law violations. The remainder were transferred to external adult facilities. One youth was encouraged to take and subsequently completed his GED while in the unit. Since opening, there have been no physical altercations between youth, no use of force, and no emergency responses within the unit.

In addition to the Trust Unit's internal program, the unit itself serves as an incentive and goal for other youth in the facility to achieve. In this early phase, staff and youth are reporting that the opportunity to live in the Trust Unit has improved the overall behavior of youth in the other units as they strive to be eligible for the unit, decreasing behavior issues, room confinement and increased safety for youth and staff alike. Those youth who demonstrate ongoing positive behavior can apply to live in the Trust Unit. Consequently, the program itself has become the highest incentive in the Juvenile Hall's Behavior Modification Program.

With privileges come responsibilities. Youth that enter the program do so knowing that school attendance and programming participation are an expectation. Productivity in school and participation in daily evidence-based programming that addresses their criminogenic needs has been enhanced due to the less stressful and incident-free environment. The ability to introduce and provide programming and other rehabilitative concepts to youth that are fully engaged and motivated to participate at this early point in the process is a unique and highly desirable outcome of the Unit.

**Discuss** how the program or project has positively impacted the community, improved delivery of services to the public or improved administration of a program internally.

Participation has reduced negative behavior by youth while in the unit and for those applying for and awaiting acceptance to the unit. There are marked reductions in behavioral related issues, gang activity and peer tension. Use of force by staff has become non-existent. Conversely, there have been significant increases in voluntary participation in schooling, programming, projects, and pro-social activities. The very small sample of youth released after serving their custody time within the Trust Unit suggests that participation in the unit reduces recidivism.

As an unintended benefit, the implementation of the Trust Unit has created increased collaboration and efficiencies with Probation and partnering stakeholder. Because of the positive and motivated nature of the

youth and staff in the unit, the Trust Unit has proven to be an ideal testing area for other programs and initiatives. For example, as the Santa Barbara County Education Office (SBCEO) works to implement new distance learning regulations involving technology and direct teacher interaction with students, they utilized the Trust Unit as their pilot to deliver and fine-tune revised curriculum using chrome books and video conferencing instruction. Building on lessons learned, SBCEO will be able to more effectively implementation their school program facility wide.

**Replicability** – Describe how your program can potentially be replicated by other California Counties. Can your program be promoted as a best practice that can be utilized by others?

Yes. Counties with the resources necessary to repurpose the physical environment with the ability to staff and train their personnel in the PYD approach and associated competencies to engage youth can replicate the program. Furthermore, in many cases County Probation Departments have seen decreased custody populations resulting in increased space that can be repurposed for this use at minimal to no additional cost. Similarly, in considering staffing and programmatic resources, Departments can shift staff and populations based on staff to youth ratios to utilize existing resources at minimal to no additional cost.

**Project or Program Contact** – List the name, title, mailing address, phone and email address of the person who can be contacted about this program.

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