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Opioids are hitting young people hard, and Maryland's Department of Juvenile Services has to adapt

By Jeremy Arias jarias@newspost.com 16 hrs ago



Staff photo by Graham Cullen

Staff file photo by Graham Cullen

During a presentation on opioids at the Frederick Police Department's crime summit on March 11, an attorney in the audience told residents that most of the addicts she deals with are between 18 and 25 years old.

"Unfortunately, because of how dangerous it is, most heroin addicts just don't survive that long," Frederick County Assistant State's Attorney Brett Jackson explained.

Sadly, the addicts are only getting younger, the prosecutor added.

Jackson encouraged the residents to report any and all drug activity to the police, regardless of whether it means someone — even a juvenile — will be arrested.

When someone struggling with drug addiction appears before a judge, regardless of the criminal charge that landed them there, prosecutors can recommend that person seek enrollment in a growing list of programs to help address their addiction.

"Put it on us, put it on the prosecutors, put it on the judges to make sure that they get the help they need," Jackson said, concluding her remarks.

Most juvenile offenders in Frederick County get their first introduction into the juvenile justice system at the Western Maryland Children's Center, a 24-bed secure detention center near Hagerstown where young people typically spend several weeks awaiting court dates following their arrests for a variety of offenses.

All offenders who enter the juvenile justice system go through more or less the same process during intake, said Mark Bishop, the superintendent of the western children's center during a walkthrough of the facility Dec. 8.

All young people detained answer 52 yes or no questions primarily designed to evaluate whether or not they are at risk for self harm or suicide, Bishop said.

Juveniles will also take a Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory test within 24 hours of initial intake, said Terrence Proctor, regional coordinator of substance-abuse services for the Department of Juvenile Services.

"The average length of stay here is very short, so we can't offer treatment in here, it would be unethical," Proctor said of the Western Maryland Children's Center. "So instead, we evaluate them to see what their needs are, whether it be family issues, substance abuse, school issues or mental health issues, and then place them in the appropriate program to get them the help that they need."

The tests and evaluations demonstrate the department's commitment to catering to the individual youth's needs, said Audra Harrison, a DJS spokeswoman.

“From the first steps in the door our focus is really in, ‘How do we assist this child?’” Harrison said. “So if we believe they would be best served within a community-based setting because of their needs, then that’s where we’ll recommend that they go.”

That approach, where kids are evaluated individually based on what their specific needs are, is in line with the latest research and best practices identified for youth rehabilitation, said Nick Moroney, director of Maryland’s Juvenile Justice Monitoring Unit.

Formed under Maryland’s Office of Attorney General, the JJMU independently audits and examines the Department of Juvenile Services to determine whether or not the needs of young people under DJS’ jurisdiction are being met in compliance with state law.

“What we want to see is a spectrum of solutions, with the first option being community-based treatment for these youth,” Moroney said. “... You don’t want to have a kid who doesn’t have a lot of severity to their issue in a long term, out-of-home, committed facility, for example.”

[DJS stats of substance abuse at-risk youth, opioid dependency at-risk kids. this should come on Monday]

Those young men who are deemed at-risk for substance abuse issues who are nonetheless ordered to be held in committed placement through DJS are typically sent to the Meadow Mountain facility in Grantsville, Harrison said.

Tucked away in the middle of the remote expanse of the Savage River State Forest, Meadow Mountain is designed to house a maximum of 40 youths in secure cottages with on-site classrooms and recreational facilities, including a gymnasium and a ropes course that is also often used by youth from other facilities from around the state, said Todd Bowman, superintendent of the facility.

The William Donald Schaefer House in Baltimore used to provide similar substance-abuse counseling services as a short-term, staff-secure facility, but that facility closed in 2016, making Meadow Mountain the only such facility left.

From fiscal years 2014 to 2016, girls accounted for an average of 27.1 percent of youth intake complaints forwarded to the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services, according to the department’s 2016 data resource guide. Not all juvenile services facilities are set up to accommodate girls in their populations, which are much more spread out.

The closest juvenile detention center to Frederick that is able to accommodate girls is the Alfred D. Noyes Children’s Center in Rockville.

Harrison said that DJS had not lost any of its ability to provide substance-abuse counseling to juveniles under the agency’s jurisdiction, citing the administration’s commitment to finding treatment options that allow youths to stay in the community and continue living with their families.

“What the secretary has done and the staff has really done in closing the doors to commitment centers is identifying, if the youth has a substance-abuse need but is not a public safety risk, then they should be treated in the community,” Harrison said. “Because of that, we’ve seen significant decreases in the amount of youth committed out of home because it’s been prioritized only for public safety risks.”

Harrison cited a 36.3 percent decline in youth commitments statewide since Fiscal Year 2014 as a huge point of pride for the department.

Moroney argued that the Schaefer House’s closure was probably motivated more by budgetary concerns than anything else.

“It may have been partially decided with a view toward what was available treatment-wise in one place or another, but I think it was very much tied to a budget decision to save money,” Moroney said. “Closing it down was not a good plan.”

Of course, the Department of Juvenile Services itself only has so much say in determining where specific youth offenders are sent, both Harrison and Moroney agreed.

“The courts decide the level of security to some extent, so, for example, if a kid is going to be sent somewhere that is hardware secure — as long as that kid is going to stay in Maryland — there’s only one place they could go, and that’s Victor Cullen,” Moroney said, as an example. The Victor Cullen Center is a secure facility in Sabillasville, in Frederick County.

Both Moroney and his counterparts at DJS also agreed that, between making referrals to community-based programs and a dedication to a youth-first attitude, the Department of Juvenile Services is relatively well situated to address the needs of young people suffering from substance-abuse problems.

“I think that the department could legitimately argue that all of the youth centers and Victor Cullen are set up to help kids with treatment of substance abuse, mainly because it’s so difficult to separate substance-abuse issues from mental-health issues,” Moroney said.

From taking steps to implement a new behavior management program for its facilities to working toward finding new and more holistic ways to rehabilitate young people instead of simply incarcerating them, DJS is on the right track.

“They are responsive to us and we do think that they are trying to do better all the time,” Moroney said. “It’s encouraging, but there’s still no question that there’s a lot left to do.”

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