

Thrive Academy
Department of Juvenile Services
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Maryland

**DEPARTMENT OF
JUVENILE SERVICES**

Joint Chairmen's Report Section V00D01.01
FY2025

INTRODUCTION

In the Report on the Fiscal 2025 State Operating Budget (SB 360) and the State Capital Budget (SB 361) and Related Recommendations - Joint Chairmen's Report, 2024 Session, pages 235-236, the budget committees required that the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) submit a comprehensive report on the Thrive Academy, DJS's community-based gun violence prevention program and case management model. The committees specifically requested information on the operation of Thrive Academy in its first year, as well as DJS's plan of operation for fiscal year 2025.

BACKGROUND

During Secretary Schiraldi's first year at the Department of Juvenile Services, there were 42 youth known to DJS who were victims or perpetrators of gun violence (predominantly, victims). This tragic number of youth involved in gun violence concerned the agency for many reasons, one of which was that there was no specific programming targeted to address gun violence.

To address this dangerous situation, DJS created the Thrive Academy.

In the spring of 2023, the Moore-Miller Administration gave DJS \$5 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to help address the issue. DJS immediately took action by providing money to Local Management Boards to expand summer programming for youth, expanded and supported summer youth employment opportunities, both as part of our "Safe Summer" initiative, and created the Thrive Academy. Additionally, grant funds from the Pull Up Fund, a private philanthropic organization, support the Thrive Academy in Prince George's County.

The Thrive Academy is the first program in the country where a juvenile justice agency is applying a Group Violence Reduction Strategy specifically focused on youth in the juvenile justice system. DJS partnered with the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (which provided technical assistance to Baltimore City leading to a 25% reduction in homicides and shootings¹) and the Annie E. Casey Foundation to conduct analyses of over 30,000 youth's cases referred to DJS over the past three years who were perpetrators or victims of gun violence to identify key variables which forecast that a young person is at a very high risk of being a victim or perpetrator of gun violence. DJS started the program in Baltimore City and Baltimore County in September of 2023, Prince George's County in December of 2023, and Anne Arundel County in January of 2024; these jurisdictions account for 82 percent of the victims or perpetrators of gun violence in FY 2023. Currently, Thrive providers in each jurisdiction have the capacity to serve 25 youth at any given time.

¹ <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/criminology-crime-and-justice-policy-lab-baltimore-gvrs>

The Thrive Academy is off to a promising start and was selected for the 2024 Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators' (CJJA) Inspiration Innovation Award. CJJA's Inspirational Innovational Award is "a prestigious recognition designed to celebrate and honor outstanding achievements in the realm of juvenile justice innovation, and is bestowed upon individuals, teams, or organizations whose groundbreaking contributions have not only pushed the boundaries of what is possible but have also left an indelible mark in the juvenile justice field."²

OVERVIEW

The Thrive Academy is an intensive community-based program in which each Thrive youth is paired with a specialized DJS case manager and a life coach from a non-profit organization employing people with lived experiences in the justice system. These life coaches are people who have often walked in the young people's shoes, who meet with them and their parents or guardians to very clearly explain to them the ramifications of gun violence, including possibly going to prison, harming others or themselves, or their families coming to harm. The life coach assists the youth in developing a life plan that moves them away from gun violence and toward success. Once that plan is developed and agreed upon, the life coach is in contact with them frequently, sometimes multiple times a day and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Thrive Academy youth are also provided with what we call a "Suitcase of Supports" that is individualized for each youth's needs, and may include:

- Stipended employment with local employers or paid service opportunities along with employment support and coaching
- Assistance with attending college or vocational training,
- Confidential relocation assistance for youth and families who are in danger of gun violence
- Trauma therapy
- Opportunities for prosocial activities
- Fiscal incentives for participation and achieving agreed-upon milestones

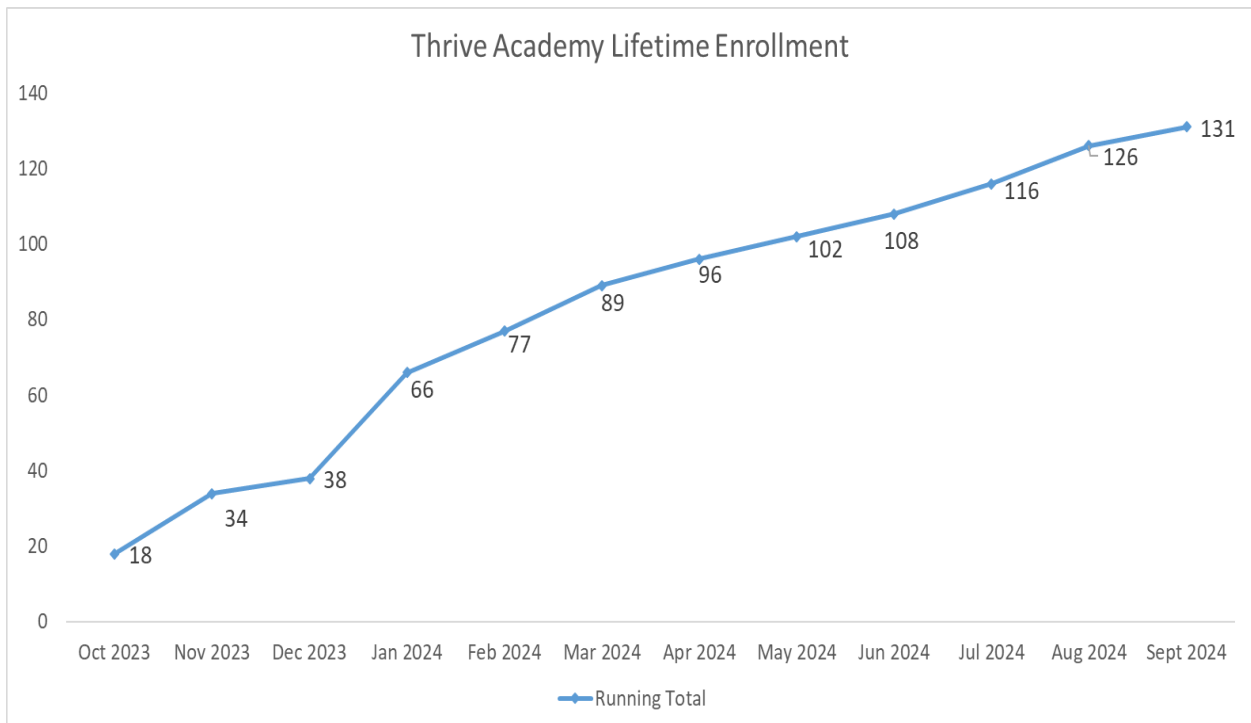
SUMMARY OF OPERATIONS (FY 2024-2025)

² Letter from Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators, June 25, 2024.

DJS funds We, Our, Us (Baltimore City), Continuous Growth (Baltimore County), and Credible Messenger Mentoring (Anne Arundel) to provide credible messenger services. The Pull Up Fund provides the funds to Credible Messenger Mentoring for Prince George's County.

Since its inception, Thrive Academy has served 131 youth through September 2024. Below is the jurisdictional breakdown of the total number of youth served, as well as a chart demonstrating the increase in enrollment over time.

County	Number of Youth
Baltimore City	57
Baltimore County	28
Prince George's County	29
Anne Arundel County	17



Identification and Referral

Referrals to the Thrive Academy are typically made at the request of a community case management specialist supervisor (CMSS) who has determined that a youth on their case

management specialist's caseload could meet the criteria for this program. Additionally, law enforcement, the state's attorney, the court, or the public defender can refer a youth. DJS held information sessions with the key stakeholders on the program about its intake criteria and how to make a referral.

Referrals are submitted to the dedicated Thrive Academy email. Once a referral is received, the Thrive CMSS and the Credible Messenger organization for the referred youth's jurisdiction meet to discuss eligibility for the program. To be identified for Thrive Academy, a DJS-involved youth must have an active order of probation or aftercare, live in a high-violence neighborhood in one of the Thrive counties, **AND** have three prior referrals, including at least one for a crime of violence.

Youth are eligible to participate in the Thrive Academy if they meet the aforementioned criteria as well as *at least one* of the following criteria:

- Not engaged in school, vocational or workforce training (e.g., non-attendance, failure to complete grade level, etc.)
- Has an existing behavioral health diagnosis
- Has a close personal friend or relative/person in the household who has been the victim of gun violence OR the youth has been a first-hand witness to gun violence;
- Are referred by external sources (e.g., law enforcement, prosecutors, defense attorneys, case managers, community members, etc.) based upon human intelligence about gun activity

However, any youth who has previously been the victim or target of gun violence or who has a close friend or family member who has recently been the victim of gun violence and who lives in one of the Thrive counties will automatically be referred, regardless of whether they meet the above criteria.

Activities

The Thrive Academy offers a transformative array of activities designed to equip youth with positive life skills and promote personal growth. Participants are immersed in a range of pro-social activities aimed at addressing their unique needs and challenges, while also fostering community engagement. These activities include:

- **Life Plan Creation and Implementation:** Each youth works with a life coach to create a personalized life plan, outlining their goals for education, employment, and personal development. Coaches then support the youth in implementing these plans, offering guidance, encouragement, and resources.

- **Community Engagement Initiatives:** Youth are encouraged to give back to their communities by participating in activities like food drives and community walks, helping to foster a sense of responsibility and civic pride.
- **Workforce Development:** The program emphasizes workforce readiness by providing access to job training, resume building, and interview preparation. Youth also participate in internships or part-time employment, gaining hands-on experience in various industries.
- **Education Enrollment and Support:** The Thrive Academy helps youth re-engage with education by enrolling them in school, vocational programs, or GED courses. Educational mentors assist with academic progress, ensuring that youth stay on track toward graduation or certification. Thrive is able to help pay for college or vocational training enrollment.
- **Community Outings:** The program organizes outings that expose participants to new experiences, such as cultural events, recreational activities, and visits to local businesses. These outings are designed to broaden the youth's horizons and promote positive social interaction.

Additionally, youth maintain close contact with their life coaches, who provide intensive, personalized support and are available to the youth on an emergency basis in the case of a crisis. This combination of consistent mentoring and positive community involvement offers participants new outlets for growth and development, creating a strong foundation for future success.

Partnership: DJS and Credible Messenger Organizations

DJS case management specialists (CMS) work closely with Thrive mentors to offer a more comprehensive, individualized support system for youth and their families. The CMS handles the administrative and legal aspects of a youth's probation —such as coordinating service referrals, preparing for court reviews, and ensuring court-ordered conditions are met. The Thrive life coaches serve as day-to-day guides – such as navigating school enrollment, employment opportunities, and community service activities, acting as a bridge between the youth and the juvenile justice system. Communication between the CMS and Thrive life coaches is key to ensuring holistic support.

DJS and the Credible Messenger organizations meet regularly on a micro level where individual cases are discussed and a macro level to discuss the overall successes and challenges of the Thrive Academy. One challenge that all the credible messenger organizations brought up during a macro meeting was the need to support families in emergencies. Families are coming

to life coaches needing basic support - food, clothing, baby essentials, or rent/relocation assistance. DJS took action in two ways, first contacting the Secretary for Housing and Community Development and the Department of Social Services for a point person in each agency that DJS could reach out to when a family is in crisis to take immediate action. Second, DJS added a person to the DJS Thrive team who can provide additional support and resources to the life coaches immediate support can be offered to families so they feel supported and secure during difficult times.

In addition to emergency assistance, the Credible Messenger groups and DJS work together to resolve conflicts and help youth navigate safety concerns. Life coaches, DJS and other key partners share information. Thrive youth have called their life coach to discuss challenges in both their home environment and the broader community. Life coaches have intervened, resulting in the youth not participating in a negative activity. This consistent communication between DJS, the life coach, youth and family engagement enables the program to respond swiftly to emerging issues, ensuring the safety and well-being of youth and communities.

Youth Stories

“Justin” is a Thrive Academy youth who lost a friend to gun violence. The Thrive team was able to quickly and successfully redirect his thoughts about retaliation for the incident. He works closely with his Life Coach to plan financial goals, attend appointments, work at a local bookstore and enroll in Living Classrooms.

“Michaela” is a 17-year-old mother of three and a Thrive Academy youth. Since working with her Life Coach, she has been attending community events and taking steps to re-enroll and complete school. She expresses the desire to improve the quality of her life and that of her children, stating that Thrive has been a “blessing” to her and her family.

Youth Engagement and Outcomes

Youth involved in the Thrive Academy have formed deep connections with their life coaches, often sharing personal challenges and concerns that they may not have felt comfortable discussing with their case managers. Many youth have opened up about safety concerns and community connections that DJS was previously unaware of, allowing the life coach to intervene and, in some cases, successfully relocate youth and their families to safer environments. This proactive approach has helped prevent dangerous situations and ensured the well-being of the participants and their communities.

In addition, Thrive Academy has empowered youth and their families to have more control over their own narratives. Unlike the traditional process, where court-ordered conditions dictate timelines and actions, Thrive has worked to ensure that youth progress at their own pace, fostering a sense of autonomy, while still complying with the requirements of the court. Families are now playing a more active role in decision-making, allowing for a more flexible and personalized approach to the youth’s development.

Youth feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with many participants expressing appreciation for the community outings organized by credible messenger organizations and with their relationships with their Life Coaches. These outings have provided opportunities for youth to build leadership skills, with some demonstrating qualities that were not previously observed by DJS staff. The holistic support offered by Thrive Academy has proven to be highly beneficial in addressing the unique needs of each youth, fostering personal growth and positive behavioral changes.

Data Outcomes

Since the Thrive Academy started in September of 2023:

- 2 (1.5%) Thrive-enrolled youth have been victims of non-fatal shootings.
- 26 (19.8%) Thrive-enrolled youth have been arrested for handgun possession or use.

The table below breaks down how many Thrive Academy youth were arrested for a gun-related offense each month during the program’s first-year.

Month-Year	Count
October 2023	0
November 2023	0
December 2023	0
January 2024	2
February 2024	2

March 2024	6
April 2024	4
May 2024	1
June 2024	3
July 2024	3
August 2024	2
September 2024	3
Total Gun Arrests	26

ASSOCIATED EXPENSES

In FY 2024, DJS supported the Thrive Academy using \$1.6 million from the American Rescue Plan Act. The program in Prince George’s County receives grant funding from the Pull Up Fund. For FY 2025, funding for Thrive has been included in DJS’ General Fund operating budget. DJS will extend the existing contracts.

The three current agreements for the Thrive Academy are estimated to serve a total of 150 youth over the course of the year. Using that figure, the estimated cost per youth is \$11,019. DJS funding in FY 2025 is \$3,350,000. In FY 2026, the funding is \$4,350,000. That amount continues the existing funding for the 150 youth and expands the program to an additional 150 youth across the State. The estimated annual cost per youth using the total of 300 and the \$4,350,00 in funding is \$14,500 per youth.

DJS currently has seven (7) specially trained Case Management Specialists (CMS) dedicated to working with youth in the Thrive Academy. The average budgeted salary for a CMS In FY 2025 is

\$67,000, total for all CMS support is estimated at \$750,000 annually. Additional staff resources dedicated to the program are approximately \$250,000 annually.

The removal of federal American Rescue Plan Act funding will have no impact on the operation of the Thrive Academy in future fiscal years, as the General Funds have been appropriated for the program's continued existence.

THRIVE ACADEMY EVALUATION

The University of Pennsylvania's Crime and Justice Policy Lab (CJP) is conducting an arms length evaluation of the Thrive Academy under funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Pull Up Fund. CJP is recognized as one of the leading researchers of gun violence reduction strategies (GVRS) in the country. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between DJS and UPenn was executed in October 2024, with data collection to cover a 2-year period. Intended outcomes include:

- Employment and school enrollment rates
- Justice system outcomes include rearrests, court, and supervision outcomes

The qualitative component of the study will conduct a thematic analysis from interviews and focus groups. Emergent themes will include perceived program efficacy, challenges encountered, and areas for improvement.

ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES

As we work to expand Thrive Academy statewide, implementing a service of this scale presents several challenges that require careful planning and ongoing adaptation.

One of the primary challenges is that this approach is relatively new within juvenile justice. Growing these services while simultaneously developing the necessary infrastructure is complex. Thrive Academy, in particular, represents a shift in how we engage youth at high risk of violence, and scaling this model statewide will involve refining our processes as we learn from early implementation experiences.

Another significant challenge is ensuring that smaller, community-based organizations have the capacity and support to apply for procurement opportunities. These organizations are often critical to the success of community-driven programs, yet they may lack the resources or

familiarity with the state’s procurement processes to apply for funding. To address this, we are committed to providing technical assistance and guidance to these groups, helping them navigate the application process and position themselves for long-term success.

Additionally, as the number of Thrive providers expands, coordination between programs will be essential. With multiple organizations working across different regions and communities, it is important to create opportunities for shared learning and collaboration. To address this, DJS is in the early stages of establishing a learning community to foster these connections, allowing programs to exchange best practices, troubleshoot common challenges, and ensure consistency in service delivery across the state. This learning community will play a key role in professionalizing the field, offering ongoing training and development for staff and mentors, and elevating the standards of care for youth.

ENHANCED SERVICES CONTINUUM

DJS received an additional \$7 million to enhance the services continuum, enabling us to expand key areas of support for youth. With this funding, we have begun building out the following initiatives:

- Diversion Programming
- Detention Alternatives and Release Supports
- Post-Dispositional Community Programming
- Re-Entry Supports
- Education and Workforce Development Programming

One of our core strategies throughout the continuum is partnering with credible messengers. These individuals are crucial to our efforts because they build trust, serve as role models, and offer culturally competent guidance. Credible messengers often share similar life experiences with the youth they mentor, including personal involvement in the juvenile or criminal justice systems or facing the same challenges that our youth encounter. This relatability allows them to connect on a deeper level, making youth more receptive to their support. Moreover, many credible messengers come from the same communities as the youth they serve, understanding the social and cultural dynamics that influence behavior and decision-making. DJS is expanding this in three populations: The Thrive Academy, youth who are on probation but are struggling with compliance, and youth charged as adults who are transferred back to the juvenile system and are pending a juvenile adjudication.

To expand credible messenger mentoring across the state, we partnered with the University of Maryland to offer a webinar that educates organizations on how to design and implement credible messenger programs. Additionally, DJS has coordinated with the Interagency Rate Committee to provide technical assistance in how to apply for a non-residential rate. DJS continues to work with providers to expand its services.

DJS has partnered with the State Advisory Group to strategically match state and federal funds to grant to local organizations, ensuring that youth at the front end of the system - pre-court diversion or Children in Need of Supervision (CINS) youth—have access to essential services. DJS has also reinvigorated partnerships with restorative response programs, which emphasize repairing harm and promoting accountability in communities. This collaboration supports restorative approaches that divert youth from formal court proceedings. Additionally, DJS is working with local counties to develop innovative Auto Theft Diversion Programs, addressing the root causes of youth involvement in auto theft and preventing deeper system involvement.

DJS has enhanced workforce development opportunities for youth, both within the community and in residential programs. DJS partnered with Workforce Investment Boards, providing funding to offer summer jobs and, in some counties, year-round employment for youth. In DJS facilities, youth who have earned their high school diploma can work in jobs created in partnership with the Department of Natural Resources. Additionally, DJS is in the planning stages of creating employment programs for youth on probation or aftercare, which would provide half-day education and soft skills training, followed by pairing them with an apprenticeship opportunity.

The Safer Stronger Together (SST) initiative is a collaboration between DJS, the Department of Human Services and the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. Together, the departments identified over 2,000 families in Maryland who are engaged with two or more of these systems. Three pilot sites for the SST program are Salisbury, Hagerstown, and East Baltimore City. In those sites a Family Navigator will co-locate and work with staff of all three agencies to coordinate services for multi-system involved families. This Family Navigator will serve as a liaison, helping families advocate for themselves and connect with the available resources. Additionally, the departments have recently initiated Community Action Boards in each site that will help guide the initiative and develop strategies for public safety within their neighborhoods. SST exemplifies a "Community Investment" approach, where resources are directed to empower families and communities and reduce crime.

DJS received a federal grant that will provide additional planning funds to continue building out the services continuum. As we proceed with this expansion, we are committed to gathering

feedback from stakeholders to identify gaps and ensure we meet the needs of our youth comprehensively.