



Pilot to Waive Fees for Parents of Delinquents Should Focus More on Parenting Skills

at a glance

As directed by the Legislature, the Department of Juvenile Justice has established a pilot program to improve parenting skills for the parents of juvenile offenders in the 4th and 11th Judicial Circuits. As authorized by s. 985.039, *Florida Statutes*, parents who complete these courses may receive a one-time waiver of fees customarily charged for children in the department's custody or supervision. The department has selected providers in both circuits who have agreed to provide services to the parents of children who have been in department custody at no cost to the parents or the department.

However, the programs offered by the two providers do not focus on parenting skills for families with delinquent adolescents as intended by the Legislature. Instead, the courses focus on relationships and marriage respectively. Enrollment for both courses is low; 8% of eligible parents in the 4th Circuit, and less than 1% of parents in the 11th Circuit. We recommend that the department implement an evidence-based program that teaches specific skills associated with parenting delinquent adolescents, and charge parents to participate in the class as authorized by law.

Scope

As directed by Chapter 2006-62, *Laws of Florida*, OPPAGA reviewed the cost of supervision and care waiver pilot program administered by the Department of Juvenile Justice. This report examines early implementation challenges and options for improving the department's efforts in meeting legislative intent for the program.

Background

The Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) is authorized by s. 985.039, *Florida Statutes*, to assess the parents of youth in its custody a nominal fee to offset the costs associated with this supervision. These fees are \$5 per day for secure detention and residential commitment and \$1 per day for non-residential commitment, home detention, aftercare, and probation. These costs can be significant for parents of children who are court-ordered into lengthy juvenile justice programs. For example, a parent with a single child committed to a moderate-risk residential commitment program with a nine-month length of stay would receive a bill for about \$1,350; this figure could be higher if the child was detained prior to commitment or placed on aftercare following release. Bills for the cost of supervision and care are automatically sent to parents unless waived by the judge. The department uses the money collected for a variety of purposes, including salaries and benefits, other personal services and contract services.

In Fiscal Year 2006-07, the department collected \$2.4 million in these fees, which represented approximately 1% of the department's budget.

Chapter 2006-62, *Laws of Florida*, created a pilot program that allows a one-time waiver of these costs for parents who complete a parenting course approved by the department. Research suggests that children are less likely to engage in delinquent activities if their parents provide them with respect, support, supervision, and consistent discipline. Therefore, courses that teach pro-social behaviors and other effective skills to parents may reduce recidivism, which in turn may save state funds in the long run.

Parents who complete the course will have all outstanding supervision and care fees waived retroactively, including those incurred for their child's prior offenses. In addition, all supervision and care fees for any siblings are also waived, and this waiver is also retroactive. However, payments already made, are not refunded.

The waiver program is being piloted in the 4th Judicial Circuit (Clay, Duval and Nassau counties) and the 11th Judicial Circuit (Miami-Dade County).

The Legislature authorized the department to charge parents to participate in the parenting classes, but in an effort to encourage participation the department elected to pursue services from providers who already were operating programs with funding from other sources and were willing to serve DJJ parents at no cost to participants or the department.

Jacksonville Network for Strengthening Families. In the 4th Judicial Circuit, Jacksonville's Network for Strengthening Families offers an eight-hour workshop called *The 7 Habits of Successful Families* in Jacksonville. The course is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through the Florida Department of Revenue, Office of Child Support Enforcement. The curriculum is based on *The 7 Habits of Effective Families* adapted by the author, Stephen Covey, for the Jacksonville community. The course is designed to change attitudes and improve interpersonal relationships. The program began serving DJJ parents in October 2006.

Trinity Church's Peacemakers Family Service Center. In the 11th Judicial Circuit, Trinity Church's Peacemakers Family Service Center offers the Strong Families curriculum, which is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The course consists of 14 one-hour sessions covering topics including components of a healthy relationship, family communication skills, money management, improving self esteem, recognizing abusive relationships, and personal accountability. Trinity Church's course became operational in January 2007.

Findings

While operational, the cost of supervision and care waiver pilot program has encountered two implementation challenges: (1) neither pilot site is offering courses that focus on parenting skills, and thus do not appear to meet the legislative intent, and (2) despite efforts to attract participants, both pilot sites have low parent enrollment.

Neither provider focuses specifically on parenting skills for families with delinquent adolescents

While the courses offered by the providers at both pilot sites may be effective for the populations they were designed to serve, they do not fulfill the legislative intent to provide training classes that focus on skills designed to help parents of delinquent adolescents reduce or eliminate criminogenic behaviors. Instead the courses focus on areas such as personal relationships, goal setting, financial management, and personal empowerment, and only tangentially relate these issues to parenting.

For example, during our visit to the class in the 11th Circuit, we observed that the class included 15 minutes of review of the previous class and 45 minutes discussing the nature of money, with such questions discussed as "What does it mean to be rich?" and "What does money mean to Oprah?" The class did not offer specific advice on budgeting or managing money or dealing with delinquent children. Department staff had not attended the sessions to observe the course.

Federal monitoring staff had visited the site, but had reviewed the provider for other purposes.

In contrast, the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has developed a Model Programs Guide that lists a number of initiatives that research has demonstrated to be effective at teaching parenting skills. These courses tend to use a highly structured small group approach that teaches parents to recognize both pro-social and antisocial behaviors in their children. The programs focus on teaching parents how and when to employ recognized social learning techniques, as well as how to improve family problem-solving skills. The department should use the federal Model Program Guide as a resource to contract with a provider to develop a program that specifically addresses parenting skills for parents of delinquent children.

Enrollment in the pilot program is relatively low

While the department arranged no-cost programs in the hopes of encouraging participation in the pilot project, this has not occurred. As shown in Exhibit 1, program participation in both circuits is low. In the 4th Circuit, 133 (8%) of eligible families have enrolled in the program. In the 11th Circuit, only 11 parents (less than 1%) have enrolled and there have been no successful completions.

Both providers have taken steps to encourage enrollment, but impediments remain. Both the Jacksonville Network for Strengthening Families and Trinity Church offer parents multiple opportunities to attend courses and offer ancillary services for children of participating families. For example, the Jacksonville Network offers classes during weekdays and weekends to provide flexibility in attendance. While the Jacksonville Network does not provide infant care, it offers character education programs that are supervised by trained child care coordinators for children ages 3 to 12 years, and teenagers can attend the course with their parents to enable families to attend courses without having to arrange for childcare. Trinity Church offers church-related activities for children during times when courses are offered and provides separate courses three times a week for parents and their teenage youth, with both courses covering the same material.

In addition, the Trinity Church expanded its catchment area from just the zip codes surrounding Trinity Church to the entire judicial circuit shortly after becoming operational. The 11th Circuit notifies parents in writing about the availability of the program. Parents are required to read and sign a document confirming this notification while they are in court.

**Exhibit 1
Participation in the Pilot Program Has Been Low**

Measure	4th Circuit	11th Circuit
Number of delinquency cases in which fees were required to be ordered	1,710	2,176
Number of delinquency cases in which parents agreed to complete an approved parenting class	133	11
Number of delinquency cases in which the parent submitted notarized documentation of successful completion to the court	85	0
Number of delinquency cases in which the court entered an order waiving fees	62 ¹	0
Total amount of fees assessed in delinquency cases in which they were required to be ordered	\$277,741	\$301,088
Total amount of fees waived	\$38,895	\$0

¹ There is a time lag between course completion and fee waiver in Circuit 4 due in part to a month-long delay between the end of the course and graduation which allows data to be collected at 7, 14, and 21 days after course completion as required in the federal grant. In addition, the waiver order must be signed by a judge. Once a month, following the graduation ceremony, the director notarizes copies of the certificates and mails them to DJJ. The department then faxes each waiver certificate to the appropriate judge to obtain the required signature. Parents may thus continue to be billed for several months after completing the program.

Source: The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. Data covers the period from October 1, 2006, through June 30, 2007.

Awareness of the program is documented in the predisposition report. This requirement is intended to ensure that parents are made aware of the financial benefit offered for successful course completion. Despite these proactive efforts, both providers continue to struggle with enrollment.

OPPAGA’s interviews with provider, judiciary, and department staff identified several possible factors which limit parents’ willingness or ability to participate in the pilot program.

- Transportation. In Circuit 4, the provider can purchase bus passes for residents of Jacksonville. However, parents in Nassau and Clay counties must provide their own transportation to attend classes. While the provider offers workshops by request at locations throughout the circuit, it requires that a minimum of 12 participants be registered in order to schedule a workshop due to the interactive nature of the course. While the Circuit 11 course operates in a one-county circuit, the size and traffic congestion of Miami-Dade County make it difficult for many families to travel to the single location where the course is offered. Commute time to the program location can be more than an hour, one way, in some parts of the county.
- Fees may be waived through other options. Many parents of delinquent youth are indigent and cannot pay fees assessed by the department for care of their children. In such cases, the courts may reduce or waive these fees, which may reduce the incentive for some of these parents to participate in the program.
- Lack of punitive sanctions. The courts cannot compel parents to attend the course, or to pay assessed the fees. Florida has no debtor’s prison, so nonpayment of fees assessed by the department may not have significant impact on the lives of parents. The department does use a collection agency to attempt to collect overdue fees from parents, but the only sanction it has at its disposal is a negative report to the major credit bureaus.

It is also possible that prospective parents read information about the classes offered by the pilot program and decided not to attend because the class content is not geared toward helping them deal with their delinquent teens.

Recommendations ---

While the Department of Juvenile Justice has implemented the pilot project at no cost to participating parents or the state, the programs offered by the providers are not focused on parenting skills for families with delinquent adolescents as intended by the Legislature. The programs are also serving few families.

We recommend that the department implement a program that is evidence-based and teaches specific skills associated with improved parenting of delinquent adolescents. If the department is unable to identify a funding source for the course, it could charge parents to participate in the classes as authorized by s. 985.0395(2)(b) *Florida Statutes*. Parents’ willingness to participate in the program, even if it becomes fee-based, may well increase if the classes specifically address how to better handle their delinquent youth.

Agency Response ---

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.51(5), *Florida Statutes*, a draft of our report was submitted to the secretary of the Department of Juvenile Justice to review and respond. The secretary’s written response is reprinted herein in Appendix A.

Appendix A



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE

Charlie Crist, Governor

Walter A. McNeil, Secretary

August 24, 2007

Gary R. VanLandingham, Director
Office of Program Policy Analysis
and Government Accountability
111 West Madison Street, Room 312
Claude Pepper Building
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1475

Dear Mr. VanLandingham:

Pursuant to Section 11.51(5) F.S., I write to provide you with a written response to your report entitled: "Pilot to Waive Fees for Parents of Delinquents Should Focus More on Parenting Skills."

We appreciate this opportunity to comment on the revised report. We were pleased to read many of the revisions your team made to the first draft. Those changes improved the accuracy of the report and present a more complete picture of the pilot project. Your summary of the causes of the low enrollment we experienced with the pilot projects were on target. However, we continue to disagree on the following issues:

1. The first sentence in the fourth paragraph on page 2 of the first draft included is a sentence that read, "The legislature did not specifically appropriate state funds to operate the pilot program." We thought this understated the importance of having dedicated revenue source to fund this, or any, project of this nature. We expected the final draft to elaborate on this important issue. Rather, it was totally eliminated. The final draft states that the Legislature "authorized the Department to charge parents to participate in the parenting classes" but that we "elected" to pursue services from existing providers with funding from other sources. That is correct. We elected to utilize existing resources for two (2) reasons. First, the Department may not contract for services without an available funding source. Cost recovery is not an available funding source. Second, it is hard to imagine that waiving the cost of care would be an incentive for parents to participate in the pilot if they are charged an even higher amount for the services provided.

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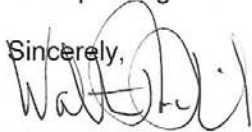
The mission of the Department of Juvenile Justice is to increase public safety by reducing juvenile delinquency through effective prevention, intervention and treatment services that strengthen families and turn around the lives of troubled youth.

Secretary Walter A. McNeil
August 24, 2007
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2. In the "Redirection" pilot, the Legislature provided very specific direction on the type of intervention to be tested and provided a line item appropriation to test the theory that some youth who would otherwise be placed in a residential program can be appropriately served in the community at a much lower cost. The final draft report implies that the same result could have been achieved without a specific intervention, or appropriation. We simply disagree.

Thank you again for allowing us an opportunity to comment on your report. We will not be requesting an exit interview.

Sincerely,



Walter A. McNeil
Secretary

The Florida Legislature

Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability



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