



## POSITION STATEMENT

*Adopted by NPJS Board of Directors ~  
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# ENGAGING YOUTH IN POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT

### STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

A primary purpose of juvenile justice service delivery programs is to provide youth with an opportunity to develop positive personal and social skills through experiential learning.

Creating a positive youth development program for justice-involved youth is intended to ensure individual and community safety through the development of pro-social skills, strengthening pro-social relationships, and increasing self-regulation. Supporting youth to become independent, productive members of society is the ultimate goal for juvenile justice service providers.

The juvenile justice system has begun a successful transition to serve the vast majority of youth offenders within their community. Consequently, residential and community-based programs have experienced lower populations and are working with the most at-risk youth with more complex needs. The challenge for all organizations and staff is to provide a safe and supportive atmosphere for these troubled youths while at the same time responding to problem behavior. Adequate staff training, proactive involvement by leadership and access to technical resources are necessary to safely and humanely manage the behavior of youth in a manner that promotes positive youth development and reduces the likelihood of reoffending.

### NATURE OF THE ISSUE

Historically juvenile justice programs have interfaced with a wide range and often divergent group of stakeholders who have inserted their influence in an attempt to positively impact daily operations and milieu. These stakeholders have focused on victim advocacy, juvenile rights, system reformation and rehabilitation, and the elimination of punitive/correctional approaches. As a result, agencies have experienced a significant struggle to move from a culture that was primarily focused on community safety, to one that offers a balanced approach of addressing the underlying individualized needs of youth while protecting peers and staff from continuing victimization from volatile high-risk youth.

Youth entering or involved in the juvenile justice system may be exhibiting a variety of challenging behaviors, which include:

- Impulsivity
- Aggression
- Defiance
- Self-harm
- Anxiety
- Withdrawal

These behaviors are often exacerbated by the presence of emotional/mental health issues, trauma, and substance use.

Many juvenile justice programs often have insufficient:

- Medical and mental health professionals essential to support positive youth development.
- Access to evidence-informed best practices that support positive youth development; including in-house technical coaching and assistance for application of these practices across daily activities.
- Funding dedicated to staff development designed to adequately train, evaluate performance, and offer individualized improvement strategies specifically focused on positive youth development.
- Staffing levels that promote the development of positive, respectful relationships and to ensure adequate coverage including times of crisis.
- Video or surveillance technology to critically evaluate post-incident reviews

### **POSITION STATEMENT**

The National Partnership for Juvenile Services (NPJS) advocates for the implementation and delivery of a positive youth development approach across the spectrum of service delivery options (community-based to secure residential). Positive youth development practices should increase the frequency of positive behaviors to meet universal needs for safety, belonging, achievement, responsibility and empathy. Juvenile justice service providers must strive to train and provide supportive resources to better enable staff in applying practices that build youth strengths and increase long term positive change rather than through punishment and short-term compliance.

Strategies should focus on creating a culture that reinforces positive behavior and uses problems as opportunities for learning and growth. Programs need to recognize the strengths of stress-adapted youth in order to turn trauma into resilience. Programs must have involved leaders who can assess the milieu, provide clear direction and expectations for staff in line with best practice, and reinforce the fidelity of programmatic implementation.

NPJS advocates for adequate funding to ensure quality training, appropriate staffing levels and access to best practice resources. These are essential in creating healthy environments in which all young people can thrive.