

KENTUCKY INITIATES EXTENSIVE PRESERVICE TRAINING FOR YOUTH WORKERS/DIRECT CARE STAFF

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Commissioner

State of Kentucky, Department of Juvenile Justice

The Department of Juvenile Justice, a new agency in Kentucky, took over the operation of all juvenile service programs (12 institutions, 17 group homes, 25 day treatment programs) in December of 1996. A top priority of the department's new leadership was to focus on the role and training needs of line staff (youth worker/direct care staff). This level of personnel had undergone tremendous changes in job function in recent years, heightened by the rise and severity of juvenile crime in the Commonwealth. The downsizing of direct care staff resulted in critical staff shortages in all residential facilities within the system. Training deficits for this staff group were recognized, but shortages were so critical in the facilities that direct care staff could not be released to attend training.

Kentucky, also under a recent federal Consent Decree, recognized that lack of skills training for direct care staff was a primary contributing factor to the inadequate, and sometimes abusive, care of adjudicated public and youthful offenders committed to the Department for custody and treatment. Under the leadership of a new administration, a plan for a comprehensive pre-service training academy was developed. The focus of this pre-service training effort was directed to the practical skills and knowledge essential for a new direct care worker to perform his/her job duties competently and quickly. The academy plan contained a mixture of OJT (On-the-Job Training), with course curriculum provided in the classroom, supported by a demonstration in skill development. Trainees are in residence five days a week at Eastern Kentucky University for the classroom portion of the training.

Current training courses were studied for application with direct care staff as well as the identification of new content areas identified through job task analysis. Training materials from several other sources and jurisdictions were reviewed. Staff trainers developed a seven-week (320-hour) schedule for the academy, which included awareness of youth population, stresses of the work environment, and the treatment philosophy of the department. The academy curriculum design reinforces the necessity of well-trained, mature, and caring staff in order to provide high quality services to adjudicated and difficult youth.

A group of expert trainers and practitioners in juvenile justice and child welfare were invited to review the proposed seven-week academy

curriculum and organization. This group provided constructive suggestions to improve the content and sequencing of the course, and they overwhelmingly supported the department's initiative for the pre-service academy. They also endorsed the course curriculum as being pertinent, current, and necessary for direct care staff. Taking into consideration this group's suggestions, the staff trainers fine-tuned the academy schedule, adding several content pieces. On April 7, 1997, 27 newly hired direct care staff began as the first class in the Department of Juvenile Justice Training Academy. Twenty-four youth workers graduated on May 15, 1997 after completing the prescribed curriculum. A new class of 24 began at the Academy on May 26, 1997. This class is scheduled to graduate on July 3, 1997 while plans are underway to begin class number three on July 16, 1997.

A data collection, evaluation, and demographics component has been added and this information will be used to improve the recruitment and hiring of direct care staff and also to make necessary adjustments in the curriculum. It is expected that the academy will improve the job performance of new staff and help the agency to retain qualified staff. Furthermore, this class is the best-prepared group in the history of the state, and we anticipate great results in the future.

The outcome of this training and its impact on service delivery is yet to be realized. All of the available literature on residential care for difficult, delinquent, and disturbed adolescents supports both the pivotal role of the direct care staff and their need for both significant pre-service and in-service training. Kentucky is committed to continuing this pre-service effort and will also provide ongoing in-service training to youth work staff, as well as all staff working in the system.

For further information regarding the Academy, contact Ms. Michele Foley, Director of Training, Department of Juvenile Justice, 320 W. Main Street, Frankfort, Kentucky 40601.

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