Florida’s PACT focuses on improving case assessments to benefit courts, youth

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Florida Makes PACT with State’s Youthful Offenders

By Darryl Olson

A.D. is a 17-year-old male from a divorced family. His father, a degreed professional, pays reasonable child support and remains involved in his life. With a good basic education and good social skills, A.D. was involved in community sports and Boy Scouts as a child, but has little to occupy his time as a teenager. His two older siblings have previously participated in diversion programs. He generally supports societal values, but associates with anti-social peers.

A.D. was arrested for the first time at age 12 for taking a $3 sticker from a store. He successfully completed a civil citation program, largely involving community service, and remained crime-free for approximately three years. When A.D. was 15, his mother moved the family to a low-income, high-crime neighborhood. A.D. was arrested at school for disrupting a school function and resisting arrest, and he was arrested in a local club for underage drinking. He was placed on intensive probation with electronic monitoring. A.D. complied with sanctions and was released from intensive probation in nearly the minimum possible time to complete the program.

After turning 17, A.D. and four friends were cruising in a family vehicle and drinking beer. While stopped at a traffic light, A.D. tossed a beer bottle out the driver’s window. It went through the open window of a car in the next lane and hit the passenger. After some verbal altercations, police were notified and pulled the vehicle over. The youths scattered, leaving A.D. to face a violent felony charge of Throwing a Deadly Missile.

Hundreds of thousands of young people like A.D. enter the juvenile justice system each year, some in need of intensive supervision and strict sanctions, others who would benefit more from a lower level of intervention. In order to make those determinations, judges need reliable, valid data. To meet that need, in 2005, Florida’s Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) developed and began using the PACT (Positive Achievement Change Tool), an evidence-based assessment/case management system. This innovative tool is designed to improve information gathering, standardize the risk classification process, and more accurately determine the individualized risk and needs of young offenders. Since it is web-based, automated and synchronized with the department’s existing information system, it also eases the paperwork overload. Benefits accrue to judges, probation officers, parents, and especially the young people whose futures often hinge on accurate and meaningful assessments. Using techniques such as Motivational Interviewing and Principles of Effective Intervention, the PACT is changing the way the Florida DJJ meets its mission to protect the public and reduce juvenile crime.

Grant funds from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and assistance from Assessments.com enabled Florida’s DJJ to implement this fourth-generation risk/needs assessment instrument statewide over the
past two years. A single, directed interview at intake provides information sufficient to make a risk classification that triages out lower-from higher-risk youths, identifies those in need of further mental health or substance abuse evaluation, and provides empirical data for informed and uniform disposition and placement recommendations to the state attorneys in each judicial circuit. A more detailed assessment is used for higher-risk youths to develop case plans that guide and follow service and supervision from intake through case closure.

How has this new tool made a difference in cases involving offenders like A.D.? Before the PACT, decisions were made based on A.D.’s presenting offense of a violent felony and the presence of a prior record. A.D. was disposed to a moderate-risk commitment program followed by six months of conditional release supervision. Arriving at the program with his GED, the residential program struggled to provide additional education for A.D., providing three college credits for a psychology course supervised by the program’s mental health therapists—the only staff qualified to teach at this level. Approximate costs to the taxpayer for residential commitment and community-based aftercare were $26,277.

Using the PACT, A.D. was assessed as a moderate risk to reoffend. The presence of a number of protective factors and promising home structure made A.D. a strong candidate for family-based intervention. By using Functional Family Therapy, A.D.’s parents learned how to manage his behavior and better coordinate his supervision, and A.D. was encouraged to separate from his negative peer group. Since A.D.’s parents continued to pay for his lodging, subsistence, education, and other expenses, taxpayer costs to treat this youth were reduced to $4,500.

The name, PACT, has two purposes. First, it emphasizes the need for change in a young person’s life by signaling to him or her the desire for positive achievement. Second, the acronym, PACT, supports a contractual relationship between the youth and the court, the community, the juvenile probation officer, and other partners in the youth’s life.

Florida’s previous assessment system was largely based on presenting offense and past criminal history (static indicators) with little attention paid to criminogenic risk factors and needs (dynamic indicators). Punishments/sanctions were meted out to match the crime, but targeted risk-reducing treatment was sometimes not provided because the criminogenic factors that led the youth to the crime were not being fully assessed or addressed. In violation of what is now known as the risk principle, probation officers spent too much time supervising low-risk youths with interested and involved parents, rather than focusing on high-risk youths more likely to commit future offenses.

The criminogenic needs are identified by the assessment’s questions which probe all the areas of a youth’s life that have been proven to be predictors of pro- or anti-social behavior: family, relationships, use of free time, attitudes and behaviors, alcohol and drugs, education, employment, mental health, aggression, and skills. The goal of the case plan is to increase the youth’s intrinsic motivation to replace his or her anti-social behavior, personality, cognition and/or associates with non-criminal, alternative behavior, particularly in risky situations.

Beginning with the nationally recognized third-generation Washington State Juvenile Court Assessment Instrument (or Back on Track!), Florida’s DJJ made three important enhancements:

1) It fully automated the criminal history domain, which adds efficiency and increases reliability;

2) It incorporated, with the assistance of Allvest Information Services, the DJJ’s Medical Director, and Dr. Thomas Grasso, creator of the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument (MAYSI-2), additional mental health and substance abuse questions to more accurately identify the risk to re-offend, and

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**New assessment tool provides valuable data for judicial decision making**

By Judge Lester Langer, Associate Chief Judge, Miami-Dade Juvenile Division

Juvenile court judges have a dual responsibility: Our decisions must add to public safety, but also help young offenders turn their lives around.

Reducing recidivism is an important goal. To accomplish it, judges begin by recognizing a simple fact: Virtually all of the youths who enter our courtrooms, including the ones we commit to facilities with intense supervision, will sooner or later return to society. How well we rehabilitate them while under our care is the key to reducing their likelihood to re-offend.

In Florida, we are committed to “what works”—evidence-based practices (EBP), and the fundamento to that is a good, valid assessment instrument. Prior to the PACT, it was my experience that PDRs (Preliminary Disposition Reports) were generally lacking in sufficient specific information. They usually contained one paragraph on the youth’s parents, one on school, one on priors, and a recommendation. Faced with a critical decision to make, this was not enough information.

With the PACT, I get extensive information in 12 important domains, including, in addition to the above, mental health, use of free time, employment, attitudes and behaviors, skills, peer relationships, use of alcohol and drugs, and aggression. Now, I am informed about those issues which led the child toward anti-social behavior, and those which represent strengths that can be built upon to promote a pro-social life.

Now, I have meaningful areas for inquiry in my courtroom. Because the PACT gives me a clear picture of a youth’s whole range of risk and protective factors, my time with him or her can be more interactive and productive, and I can take advantage of those positive things that help the youth overcome adversity. For example, if the assessment tells me a particular child has strengths in the arts and a low level of risk, I might recommend community service with a school theatre department, rather than detention.

Another example might relate to what I have learned about the youth’s family. Miami is a tri-lingual community, very culturally diverse, and many families have strong family values. The PACT tells me if there is someone in the family who can be supportive and help with the child’s rehabilitation, and it also informs me about those risks in the family which need to be addressed.

Am a believer in the efficacy of EBP and the PACT is producing evidence of a kind we have not had before. If I have a concern, it is that the instrument hasn’t been around long enough for me to know if I am using it as effectively as possible. This tool holds great potential for judges if we will take the time to learn it. More and ongoing training will be required for current and future judges.

I believe the PACT will enable us to fully use our professional judgment to increase public safety and focus rehabilitative efforts on each individual youth to help turn his or her life around.
also the need for further mental health and substance abuse evaluation; and
3) It added a new automated case planning module, which not only saves precious time for case workers, it allows the Department, for the first time, to focus its level of service on “what works” for each individual and to truly track the effectiveness of its efforts to reduce offenders’ risk.

The tool has been validated to predict risk to re-offend in Florida regardless of race and gender, and it has been implemented in a statewide system which receives more than 100,000 youth referrals each year. The DJJ administers all aspects of the juvenile justice system, beginning at intake from first arrest and encompassing detention, diversion, probation, residential commitment, and aftercare. Counties share a portion of the state-operated detention costs, but do not administer their own centers or probation programs.

Integrating the PACT into Florida’s Juvenile Justice Information System has reduced workload and opportunities for error through the auto-population of data into various forms and reports. The system produces management reports at various levels that track progress, as evidenced by reassessments, and produce status and profile reports by youth, juvenile probation officer, probation unit, or circuit office.

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a key element of the new assessment tool. Intake staff are trained in the evidence-based MI process, which provides them with the skills to initiate change during the first meeting with the youth. Screening is no longer a paperwork exercise, but an opportunity to begin rehabilitation. MI has been around since the early 1980s when it was first developed from experience in the treatment of problem drinkers. In recent years, MI has gained increasing relevance in juvenile justice as the evidence piled up that behavioral change most frequently occurs when the motivation for change comes from within—a person exploring and resolving his or her own ambivalence—rather than from without, e.g., from sanctions. A probation officer well-versed in MI has some powerful tools with which to help a young person turn his or her life around.

Training on the new tool began on a pilot basis in November 2005, with the Hillsborough and Pinellas Juvenile Assessment Centers (JACs). More than 25,000 intake cases come through these doors each year, representing almost one-sixth of Florida’s annual delinquency referrals. Of these, nearly 27% originate in local schools. Prioritizing recommendations based on risk-to-reoffend in a manner that judges, state attorneys, and school officials could support posed a challenge. Consistent training and on-site technical assistance permitted the generation of 6,000 PACTs for initial study purposes.

The state’s 1,800 Juvenile Probation Officers (JPOs) and private-provider JAC staff recently completed PACT training and turned their attention to case plans. The Youth Empowered Success (YES) Plan, also developed by Assessments.com in collaboration with Brad Bogue of J-SAT, ranks the youth’s criminogenic needs and suggests various treatment methods for addressing the most pressing risk factors. A cadre of in-house quality assurance specialists, or PACT liaisons, provides support and technical assistance to field staff, funneling unique questions and problems to the statewide PACT Coordinator.

Initial reception to the PACT from court partners and law enforcement has been strong. Judges are especially pleased with the amount of new information available to them for decision making. They feel empowered to make decisions in the best interest of the youth and public safety, since treatments targeted toward specific criminogenic needs are most proven to reduce recidivism. State attorneys find that decisions based on the seriousness of the crime and chronicity of the youth’s criminal history are giving way to considerations of need. Even those who are uncomfortable with the philosophy seem influenced by the amount and quality of statistical analysis supporting the change. While wary of the amount of information available through the PACT, public defenders are encouraged by the focus on addressing needs. In some areas, public defenders have stepped up their efforts to ensure that youths are informed of their rights and that PACT information is used for disposition rather than adjudication.

Reception among JPOs has been mixed but positive. Most agree that the PACT is a step in the right direction, but are still faced with high caseloads which inhibit their ability to use their new MI skills as much as they would like. They value the professionalism that an increased treatment focus carries but are impatient to see more of the new evidence-based treatment programs needed to serve their high caseloads.

The PACT is the cornerstone of the DJJ’s comprehensive efforts to incorporate evidence-based practices and programs into the juvenile justice continuum. PACT serves as a pre- and post-test for delinquency programs, which helps JPOs make informed decisions about the termination of supervision and provides uniform data for researchers to determine the added value of these programs. In addition to Motivational Interviewing, state-operated and privately operated community-based and facility-based programs are beginning to use evidence-based programs such as LifeSkills Training, Aggression Replacement Training, Cannabis Youth Treatment,
Thinking for a Change, Brief Strategic Family Therapy, Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care, Multisystemic Therapy (MST), and Functional Family Therapy (FFT). In fact, Miami-Dade County is now the only location in the country known to offer MST, FFT, and Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care.

In addition to PACT’s paperwork efficiencies, Florida’s State Advisory Group recommended funding to automate the state’s Detention Risk Assessment Instrument that staff use to screen youths for secure detention. A newly created Office of Program Accountability includes a technical assistance unit that will assist staff in converting to evidence-based programs and practices with fidelity and adherence to program models.

These plans and resource allocations were supported by the PACT itself. The new automated system provides a wealth of data for decision making and marketing of the agency’s budget requests. For example, the first six months of PACT data revealed that 23% of disposed youths experienced problems with anger and aggression, 66% were currently using drugs or alcohol, 74% have anti-social friends, 41% have no positive adult relationship in their lives, and 52% admire their antisocial peers.

PACT Implementation Team members continue to design new ways of maximizing available data and streamlining case management tasks. Future plans include a reservation system where JPOs can actually book the statistically indicated service while crafting the YES treatment plan. As staff review plans with the youth and family, they envision viewing eligibility requirements, physical location sites, assessing transportation issues and potential wait times, and assigning the youth for program intake.

Florida’s innovative assessment/case management system is providing a comprehensive approach to dealing with the criminal sanctions and treatment needs of youths throughout the juvenile justice system.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
With more than 29 years of experience working with delinquent youth, Darryl Olson has served as Assistant Secretary for Probation and Community Corrections in the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice since his appointment in July 2005. For more information on the PACT, please contact Lee Ann Thomas at (850) 414-2488.
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