VOICES FROM THE FIELD:

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH COURT PROFESSIONALS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

EVALUATION REPORT

2020

WSCCR

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Introduction

As part of the Girls Court Program (GCP) process evaluation, we conducted interviews with service providers and juvenile justice system stakeholders. The interviews were designed to better understand the effectiveness of the program through the lens of key experts and individuals that are directly involved with the program and or/program participants. Interview protocols focused on the following areas: program operational aspects, service delivery and program effectiveness. The interview questions sought to assess if the needs of girls are being met; how responsive girls are to the services provided; if the services are effective; factors and assessments of success; and how to improve the overall program approach. This report summarizes key findings from these interviews.

Methods

Key informants were identified by the Kitsap County Juvenile and Family Court Services team, with representation from two key stakeholder groups:

1. Service providers (Drug & alcohol treatment, OurGEMS mentors, school support mentor, Wrap around services, HOPE INC, West Sound Olive Crest Director and ILS supervisor)
2. Juvenile justice professionals (judge, prosecutor, probation manager, court supervisor, detention manager, detention alternative staff, and program director)

In total, 26 key professional stakeholders (16 service providers and 10 court professionals) were identified for interviews and a total of 17 (10 service providers and 7 court professionals) were interviewed. Interviews were conducted between July and September of 2020. Each interview was about one hour in length and covered 10-15 questions (see Appendix). All 17 participants were interviewed via Internet/video conference by an independent evaluator with a background in social sciences and research methods. The interviews were semi-structured with the use of the same topic guide (see Appendix) to ensure that a common set of questions was asked of all stakeholders. The interview data were analyzed using framework analysis to identify common and variable patterns of responses across participants, in particular relating to program implementation and effectiveness. The key findings from this analysis are presented below.

Key Findings

1. STAKEHOLDERS' VIEW OF THE PROGRAM

There was a shared understanding of the purpose of the Girls Court program (GCP) among service providers and court professionals. They view the program as a specialized form of a therapeutic court that provides support to the clients by linking the girls to community resources, social service agencies, and mentors. The most commonly cited purpose of the program was to connect the girls with a community support system, so that the girls have continuing support from the local community with whatever they need once the court leaves their lives.

When asked about how the GCP is different from other court programs/models, both service providers and court professionals identified several distinguishing features. Many mentioned a

proactive approach of the program in finding and bringing together local community-based professionals to meet the needs of girls. This extensive community outreach component of the program enables girls to be served in their local communities instead of relying on services available within the juvenile justice system. Community-based services available through the program were described as tailored to girls' needs through creating a culture of empathy, compassion and trusting relationships.

"The program focuses on building relationships and enhancing life and coping skills that increase opportunities for girls' future success."

"We have been lucky enough to have great community support so that we can make sure that the girls have continuing care with whatever they need once the court leaves their lives and the girls still have people they can talk to and trust."

"Community-based services enhance positive behaviors through participation in purposeful activities."

Several stakeholders noticed a unique atmosphere in the courtroom that was described more as a therapeutic setting than a regular courtroom where there is a feel of relative informality, both in the conversation between the Judge and program participants and in the interactions among court staff. Court hearings were described as an opportunity for engagement and the place where each girl can observe each other's success and learn from one another. Stakeholders also noted a more active involvement from the Judge who participates not only in court hearings but also in shared activities outside the courtroom. Several court professionals noted that the Judge serves many different roles, such as role model, parental figure, advocate, enforcer and supporter by showing concern about each participant's progress and celebrating each girl's success. This differs from a traditional court setting in which the judge serves as an objective and removed decision maker. Several court professionals commented on the roles of the prosecutor and defense attorney that extend beyond the courtroom to establish connections with program participants. One stakeholder quoted a program participant who said "It does not feel like being in the system" to illustrate a collaborative environment of the program.

Recognizing girls as active participants in the treatment process was another theme that surfaced from interviews with both service providers and court professionals. In a traditional court model, the clients are often dictated the course of action without much opportunity for dialogue. In the Girls Court program, participants have an opportunity to voice their concerns, issues and ideas and this feedback is used to adapt the direction of the care plan. This model shifts the way that the girls have been traditionally handled by the juvenile justice system. As one service provider stated: "Girls are not problems; they are partners in their own positive development and growth."

"The program gives the girls a voice in court."

"The program is designed to increase self-esteem, competence and overall growth of girls."

2. THE PRIMARY NEEDS OF GIRLS PARTICIPATING IN THE PROGRAM

When asked about the needs of girls coming to the program, both service providers and court professionals agreed that although the needs vary from girl to girl, they are generally within the same areas of concern. These include histories of trauma, mental health issues, substance abuse, unhealthy relationships, family dysfunction, lack of stability, lack of support, academic failure, school disengagement, low levels of self-esteem and self-confidence.

To gain additional insight, key stakeholders were asked to identify the top three or four problems facing girls coming to the program. For both service providers and court professionals, trauma, mental health, substance abuse and family counseling were consistently identified as <u>top areas</u> of concern.

"If they [girls] can overcome trauma that they experienced, work on mental health and substance abuse issues, they can eventually deal with other issues. If these issues are not taken care of, they can cause other problems down the road and result in the same behaviors that brought the girl in the system in the first place."

"Anything we can do help with trauma is very important for future success of these girls."

Service providers rely on the court professionals in assessing the programmatic needs of the girls. The probation manager uses the PACT (Positive Achievement Change Tool) and structured interviewing techniques to assess criminogenic needs and protective factors of each girl prior to the program. Subsequent assessment is administered at the end of the program and it serves as an indicator of progress and improvement during the program. In addition to risks and needs, probation manger gatherer additional information, including girls' strengths, personal interests, hobbies, and commutation style. This information assists staff with matching services that support a young person's strengths. Court professionals believe that this information affects the likelihood of succeeding in treatment.

The topic of relationship needs with supportive adults and peers was also consistently mentioned by stakeholders. A common theme was the importance of being heard and understood. Mindful of this view, service providers and court professionals noted that the program creates various opportunities for girls to regularly meet and connect with peers and mentors in a supportive environment.

"When you bring girls together, they can share their stories, they can related, and if you create safe space for girls, they can open up and talk about issues affecting them and realize they are not alone. They can work on relationships. "

3. WHICH OUTCOMES ARE MOST CRUCIAL? WHICH OUTCOMES ARE THE MOST DIFFICULT TO ACHIEVE?

When service providers and court professionals were asked which outcomes are the most crucial, several important themes emerged. First, the importance of girls staying connected and engaged with treatment/service providers during the program and beyond. For example, most interviewees stated that staying engaged with services is paramount for girls if they want to create a new foundation for healthy behaviors, build positive relationships in the community, learn social skills, re-enroll in school (or getting help with obtaining GED), and find better ways to spend recreational time.

Willingness to participate with their mental health counseling /treatment and substance abuse treatment plan was also identified as crucial, and also an area of a pushback from some girls, especially with in-patient treatment. Court professionals identified several reasons for such resistance. In some cases, treatment resistance happens because girls are "directed" to do something they do not want to do. In other cases, resistance is rooted in girls' difficulty trusting authority figures (including the therapist), especially when treatment is being applied in a correctional setting. Another reason is in girls' disbelief in their ability to control their circumstance or their ability to change their situation. Probation counselor, the judge, therapists, and other professionals who work with girls are mindful of the importance of developing a collaborative therapeutic relationship with the girls and constantly are looking for new techniques to address resistance to treatment on the part of the girls. This includes identifying potential barriers to engaging with services, whether psychological, emotional, or physical, developing and maintaining trusting relationships with the girls, demonstrating commitment to follow through, taking a personal interest in the well-being of participants.

"We can direct them to go, and sometimes they even go, but they do not engage. Until they go and engage, we cannot say our work is done."

"The girls should be bought-in the program. If they are not ready, they will not engage. They have to be willing to engage."

"Now we have the most resistance with in-patient treatment. One girl, in particular, refused to go and she talked with other girls. The family was supportive and convinced her to go, and she went, but was not engaging. Now she started to engage and she realized that the fears she had about in-patient treatment were not true.… There is another girl, who is still refusing to engage. We need somehow make her understand that we are not the enemy, and we are not sending her away… we want her to get help. This is the challenge right now."

"We currently have a couple girls who are not engaging, but we keep trying… we do not give up"

"Drug addiction is difficult to address, because they [participants] need to see a problem. If they are not ready to deal with drug addiction, it is hard to make a change."

4. HOW DO STAFF VIEW THE SERVICES PROVIDED TO PARTICIPANTS?

Stakeholders who work with girls stated that the services offered through the program are meeting the needs of the young people. Working collaboratively with community-based partners, program staff was able to develop a comprehensive package of services not available from the juvenile court: group counselling, life-skills training, mentoring, job readiness training, school counseling, family counseling, mental health and substance abuse treatment. Across both stakeholders groups, interviewees noted that not every girl requires the same level of care and treatment. In order to provide an adequate level of care to a participant, the program staff relies on standardized testing tools to determine what is needed for each girl. For some program activities, girls are required to participate and some activities are voluntary. Weekly reports are used to monitor participants' progress to ensure there are no gaps in services.

"We try to tailor what we are doing with each girl. Hopefully, with the community partners we currently have, we can meet the needs of the girls."

"Majority are decent kids who have no history with the juvenile department, but there are a few who are high-level offenders and they are a challenge to us."

"Many participants have told me while leaving the program that they would not be in a position they are right now if they were not participating in the program. That tells me that whatever we are doing is making a difference."

The majority of professionals we interviewed noted that service delivery depends on girls' motivation to participate and treatment readiness. On a question about what affect participants' choices for participating both court professionals and services providers several factors including the degree of buy-in to the program, ability to establish connections with program staff and service providers, readiness for change, understanding of expectations, and willingness to succeed.

"We have some girls who really bought-in into the program and responded very well, they were satisfied with the outcomes and services."

"The girls should be bought-in the program. They have to be willing to engage. So, you need to build up the relationships and then they might to buy-in….For some, we can only hope that over time they can see that the program can benefit them. Some, still do not like it, because it is being court-involved, and they are not ready….they feel the system is their enemy. "

"The quality of the relationships between girls and program staff makes a difference."

5. HOW DO PROGRAM STAFF DEFINE SUCCESS?

Although there was mostly a shared understanding of the program effectiveness among service providers and court professionals, there were some differences in conceptual perception of program success. From court system perspective, the primary long-term indicator of program success is reduced recidivism. At the same time, many court professionals noted other indicators of success, many of which are aligned with positive youth development model and can yield a more nuanced picture of individual change in the short-run. This includes improvements in social skills, attitudes, confidence, self-efficacy, and academic performance and reductions in internalizing symptoms and risky behaviors. Sustained connections between youth and adults (e.g., mentors, service providers, counselors, etc.) after graduation from the program and satisfaction with outcomes were also mentioned as signs of program success.

"Bottom-line is … recidivism is the best measure of success. If the kids go through the program and they are not back to probation, this is the best indicator of success. This is the easiest thing to measure. Sobriety or mental health are much more difficult to measure when they [participants] are out of the system. We do not have a way to track their status/progress in these areas."

"For so long, the court would rely purely on recidivism statistics as an indicator of success. For me, if the person has a relapse and returns to using drugs, but stays away from the system, this is not success."

"I still consider the success if they [participants] relapse and have a problem but know how to navigate themselves into treatment and correct the issue without court intervention, that is still a success to me."

Similar to court professionals, service providers see success as multidimensional concept with different dimensions meaning different things to different stakeholders. While all saw skills building and reduction in risky activities as important, the emphasis on these goals varied according to the type of care provided to the girls. For example, stakeholders proving substance use and/or mental health care, when discussing program success, put more emphasis on problem recognition, trauma relief, self-awareness, self-understanding, symptom reduction and change in patterns of behaviors that used to bring harm.

"Many outcomes of our work become evident only after months of work, especially in mental health and substance abuse treatment field."

"Recovery from trauma is an individual process and will look different for everyone. For many, overcoming the trauma is a life-long process. Every small progress in healing process is a success."

"Addiction is a lifelong disease requiring continued care. Our job is teach the tools and strategies allowing clients to remain sober after treatment."

Stakeholders providing mentoring, housing support, and/or training services put more emphasis on housing stability, self-efficacy, independent living skills, and positive relationships. Stakeholders providing education counselling accentuated learning and social skills, academic performance, high school, post-secondary enrollment, and employment.

"…girls get lost, they are overwhelmed with so many things required of them [at school] and they do not know where to start and they give up… Luckily, I was able to help some of them how to navigate their school work."

"As it relates to the individual kids… Do they successfully complete the program? Were they provided the services they needed? Did they engage in the services, and then we hand them on to the community to continue with services. If we can accomplish these, we are successful. For the program, as the whole, if we could do that for the majority of our girls, than the program is successful. Part of this would be statistics, are they coming back to the court as adults (recidivism), but we might not see that for several years. "

"I really want these girls to be successful in whatever way they define/measure success, they do not need to go to college, whatever they see success: either having a family or living a good life, I just want them to achieve their goals and continue to be productive."

Of note, several court professionals connected program success with having a great team of professionals who are committed to improving the system's responses to girls and young women and who have a shared understanding of why the work they do is important.

"…I never want to give up on any of the girls. I think this is what is wrong with the system. Before we had a limited amount of time…and many fell through the cracks of the system, and the system has given up on them. We do not want this perception anymore. I want them [girls] to know that we care and we want to make a difference."

"For any treatment court, the team is very important. The team is critical. Our goal is to make probation therapeutic. If we are successful with Girls court program, we can use the same model for probation."

6. **CHALLENGES TO SERVICE PROVISION**

In speaking with service providers and court professionals about challenges to service provision, several themes emerged. An important issue mentioned by all stakeholders was COVID -19, which affected the ability to recruit new girls to the program as well as maintaining the same level of activities with current participants. The disruption of all in-person contacts either in court or outside the court posed a structural challenge for the program. Numerous program staff noted that on-line and/or distant check-in sessions are not adequate for maintaining the same level of engagement with the girls. During this time, it is harder to help girls to overcome fear and the perception that they don't have control over their life and/or change anything.

"I really think covid-19 hurt the program in a couple different ways: we do not do court dispositions in the court and we do not see girls entering the program, our numbers dropped. Also the program is really about the relationships between judge, probation officer and the girls. Not being able to meet in person, doing things over zoom, maintaining virtual contact is not the same as judge being with them in garden or Shannon seeing them every week.

"Right now, I do not think that the program is implemented as planned. We are missing a key component - activities with community providers. It is a big component. It introduces the girls to the community partners, to court team in a different environment, it helps us to earn their [girls'] trust. Covid-19 has stopped those activities. We keep induvial sessions, talk-to-the judge sessions, for some of the girls that helped, but the program is missing the component of our community partners. We hope to resume and get back on track."

"The girls feel trapped, they feel they do not have a choice, stuck in their position. I think, when you can show them opportunities and encourage them to make a step forward, that is where the change happen… how can you do that when you cannot meet with them in-person?"

Several respondents listed transportation as a barrier to program participation for some girls. One girl, in particular, could not attend some program activities due to lack of transportation because the program does not provide transportation to and from the shared out-of–court activities, and caregivers could not provide transportation either. Transportation also limited access to community-based activities for this girl.

Court professionals also mentioned the challenge of navigating family dynamics especially if the family does not provide a supporting environment. Family engagement and support were identified as critical for achieving positive outcomes for youth. Toxic relationships with peers—especially drug using peers— has been identified as for another barrier for working with youth who are trying to quit using alcohol or other drugs. A final challenge to the program is variability in individual youth's readiness for change. Trying to serve a group of girls with different treatment readiness and resistance levels is a challenge.

According to the service providers and court professionals, the reasons some girls are resistant to treatment are mostly personal such as a lack of trust in the system, feeling of being trapped or forced into treatment, and belief that they do not have a choice or cannot change their circumstances. Service providers also noted that girls' engagement is affected by how much they know about the program and/or community partner either through court staff or peers. The more girls know about the program and services, the more willing they may be to participate.

> *"Some girls are not super happy to be in the program, it is not a voluntary program, and they're court-ordered to participate. A lot of push back form girls, dose of attitude from girls. You have to break down the barrier, as you go through the program, some of them are reserved too, and Shannon tells me that these girls are making connections…. I see attitudes shifting."*

7. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FIRST YEAR OF THE PROGRAM

When service providers and court professionals were asked about key lessons learned from implementing the program (regarding both staff and girls served), the following was mentioned:

- Having staff involved in the program share the same vision of the program's goals and objectives is important, especially for a program with a big community outreach component.

- Implementation challenges are typical in the first year of a new program, especially around contracts with community partners.

- Don't try to "fix" everything at once. Focus on making the most dramatic changes first by strengthening youth's connections to positive adults, peers, and community services.

- It is important to solicit input from youth and families regarding their program experiences. Program staff can solicit this input using various mechanisms, such as surveys, focus groups, and informal conversations.

- Good mentors and facilitators are critical for participant responsiveness or the extent to which participants are engaged by and involved in the activities.

Appendix

Interview Questions

Research Question	Pertinent Interview questions
1. How do staff view their role in the Girls Court program and how do staff understand the purpose of the program?	- What is your role in the program? How long (and how often) have you been working with the program? - In your own words, please explain the purpose of the Girls Court (GC) program? How is it different from other court programs/models? - How do you define needs in general, and gender-responsive needs, in particular? What do you see as the primary needs of girls participating in the GC program? - Which outcomes are most crucial? - Which outcomes are the most difficult to achieve? Why?
2. How do staff view the services provided to participants?	- Are the services offered through the program are meeting the needs of the young people? - Do participants receive the proper amount, type and quality of services? - Are participants satisfied with the services they receive? (perception) - What other services are you seeing the girls are in need of? What is being offered but not meeting the needs?
3. Do staff think they were able to implement the activities as planned? How do court professionals adjust and innovate in response to changing needs?	- Is the program being implemented as planned? If not, what factors limited its implementation? - Have you experienced any practice changes or adaptation in response to the needs of girls or participants' feedback? - Are there unique challenges to implementing the GC program? If so, how do you address these challenges? - Are there any best practices that you (or your team) has implemented that you believe are effective regardless of having evidence? How were these practices developed? - If you could implement the GC program activities differently, what would you do? - In what ways has the team ensured the program and services were accessed equitably?
4. How do staff define and measure the effectiveness of the GC program? [We want to understand the impact, how they measure impact, and not simply focus on a success story].	- How do you define and measure effectiveness of the GC program? What are some examples that demonstrate the program's effectiveness? - Was there a change in girls' outcomes (i.e. behavior, actions, confidence, attitude, well-being, health) after completing the program? Please describe. - Have there been any unintended positive (or negative) results from program participation? If so, please describe. - What are key lessons learned from implementing the program (regarding both staff and girls served)? - How can this program be improved? - What do girls need to stay on a positive track after completing the program?

Supplementary Questions on the Impact of COVID-19 (only if there is time left)

Research Question	Pertinent Interview questions
5. How has the work of the court professionals been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?	• How have you changed services since COVID began? How were decisions made about what to change, and how it should be changed? • What methods are you employing to connect with youth? • Are these methods effective in connecting with youth? • What policies, laws, or rules that would you like to see implemented to help meet these needs? • What resources would be the most helpful to have during this time?