

3rd Annual Summit on Substance Abuse,
Mental Health and School Safety/Discipline
Best Practices for Working with Youth

March 10, 2008

Commissioner Albert Murray

Welcome everyone to this, the 3rd Annual Summit on Substance Abuse, Mental Health and School Safety.

Thank you Miguel. Miguel Fernandez is one of our fine DJJ staff, the assistant director of Behavioral Health Services. I recognize Rick Harrison the office director and I will mention them again in a few moments.

(Mention any fellow commissioners or other notables in the audience)

The agencies this conference brings together; The Department of Juvenile Justice, The Department of Human Resources, The Department of Education and

The Georgia Council on Substance Abuse, are charged with helping the youths in this state that are at risk of falling through the cracks and getting left behind. No one agency can do that alone. That is why it is imperative that all of us in this room and the agencies we represent communicate and collaborate on a regular basis. That is why this conference, which I hope continues for many years to come, is important. It gives us the chance to step away from our daily responsibilities and come together to look at the big picture and realize there are other agencies and other people out there who are working toward the same goals, and who we can work with, and learn from, and collaborate with to help us all better provide services to the young

people of Georgia. I am confident that there will be much in the way of communication and collaboration coming our way in the next three days. I know that DJJ's aim in participating in this conference is to impart information to those of you outside the agency that you can take back to your places of work and to garner new insights and ideas from other agencies that we can use at DJJ. To that end, Coy Satterfield, a DJJ education program manager, and Janice Shieh (SHAY), clinical director at the Augusta YDC, will be giving presentations on DJJ's "Think Exit at Entry" program and Understanding Self Harm, respectively. DJJ is also funding the presentation on the Seven Challenges substance abuse rehabilitation program. In addition, there are,

I believe, approximately 50 DJJ staff here to participate and learn during this conference. We will all benefit from each other's participation over the next three days.

Last year DJJ joined the other agencies in this conference because **we are** a key part of delivering services through best practices to youth. Our mission statement speaks to that.

DJJ's mission is to protect and serve the citizens of Georgia by holding youthful offenders accountable for their actions through the delivery of treatment services and sanctions in appropriate settings and by establishing youth in their communities as productive and law abiding citizens.

We realize that our mission is best met by drawing on all available resources and working with partners, like you, who have the training, expertise, resources and services available to help us meet our mission and provide appropriate services and opportunities to Georgia's youth. That mission and our agency fit well within the parameters of this conference.

Likewise, we are an equal partner with each of you in helping you fulfill your mission as we all work together to help Georgia's youth.

Collaboration between our agencies is important, critical if you will.

I would like to take a moment to give an example of successful collaboration.

An example of where we've joined together to be successful is DJJ's School Based Supervision Program. We started this in 2006 as a pilot program and have now expanded it to more than 100 middle and high schools across Georgia. Our probation staff are spending some of their work hours attending to caseloads within the schools. This is a collaboration with educators to slow the flow of at-risk youth to DJJ. Our staff are working those caseloads on school campuses and their presence is also making those schools safer. Their primary concern is having a close working relationship with the youth on their caseloads, being present and on hand, available to work out issues for those students and the DJJ staff are able to defuse incidents from escalating in many

situations. We are helping students stay trouble free and I believe making the school experience safer for all students in those settings.

Collaboration among agencies will continue to be a must for all of us to be successful in our work. Why?

Allow me to share some numbers with you:

Between fiscal years 04 and 06 there was a four percent increase in the DJJ at-risk population in Georgia. During that same period, there was also a 16 percent increase in intake admissions.

DJJ population projections for 07 through 2011 show an additional six percent increase in the state's at-risk population along with a truly staggering 22 percent increase in DJJ intake admissions. If these

projections prove accurate DJJ will need an additional 185 RYDC beds and almost 400 more YDC beds by 2011. This translates into 3 new 64 bed RYDCs and 3 new 150 bed YDCs. To build and maintain these beds would require \$135 million in construction costs and \$48 million each year after that in operating costs.

Looking at these numbers, we have determined that we need to look more closely at whom we are sending to secure facilities and why they are there.

As an agency we are currently working to try and make changes to the law that would help keep lower level offenders, such as those who have committed technical violations, status offences or

other minor offenses out of DJJ secure facilities.

These violations certainly deserve consequences, but perhaps not consequences as severe as provided for by current practice and law.

All of the youth that are admitted to one of our secure facilities are screened for mental health and substance abuse issues within two hours of admission. In fiscal year 07, 55 percent of admitted youth were referred for a mental health assessment. The average daily mental health caseload for RYDCs was 27 percent in FY 07. For YDCs the average mental health caseload was 34 percent.

As for substance abuse problems among DJJ youth, between 60 and 75 percent of youth in DJJ secure facilities need intervention. In FY 07 25 percent of youth in RYDCs received substance abuse services and 50 percent of youth in YDCs received them.

During the fiscal year, DJJ conducted nearly 38,000 substance abuse groups and individual counseling sessions for youth in our facilities.

It goes without saying that these youth are not just DJJ's youth. They are in the schools and many of them are involved with DHR before, during and after their time with DJJ. Many of these youths need mental health and substance abuse treatment before they get to DJJ, while they are with us and

after they leave us. To accomplish that continuity, we must improve our collaboration process, work to identify needs for mental health and substance abuse treatment, use evidence based treatment, and provide for diversion to community based mental health treatment where appropriate. It is important that we don't treat youth behind the fences of a secure facility when they should be receiving treatment in the community. I think we can all agree that there is nothing to be gained by locking up youths who pose a minimal threat to public safety and can receive the help they need elsewhere.

There has been a lot of talk about mental health care recently. As we are all aware, there is currently a commission, established by the Governor, examining the delivery of mental health care in the state. DJJ has been part of that process, and recently hosted a meeting of that commission at the Augusta YDC, a facility that is tasked with providing for youth with special needs. At that meeting, Abel Ortiz, the commission chairman, raised a question about opportunities for intervention with youths after they get in trouble but before they end up in the court system. Right now, unfortunately, the system is not set up to allow for those options. As DHR Commissioner BJ Walker noted at that meeting, those sorts of changes require a change in values.

Change, especially change in government, does not often come quickly, but I know we are working toward change at DJJ. I know the other agencies that have sponsored this conference are doing the same, and I know that the Governor's office is open to change as well. We must continue to work toward change. Our agencies are made up of thousands of employees who work hard every day to deliver the best possible services they can to the young people in our care, yet we all know that there is always room for improvement, and there will be new, evidence based ways of treating young people. We must not be afraid to embrace them if they are worth

embracing. It won't always be easy, but most things worth doing usually aren't easy. There is always resistance to change, but change is necessary.

When an agency fails to change in the face of evolving needs others will step in and force that change.

DJJ found itself in that position 10 years ago when the Department of Justice filed suit and the agency agreed to abide by a Memorandum of Agreement.

We are now very close to closing out the MOA, and even though we anticipate being out from under federal oversight very soon, it is imperative that we continue the legacy of positive change that the MOA kick started. I know that all of you are looking

for ways to improve delivery of the services you provide, and I would like to say one more time that DJJ is committed to working with you on that front. Together we can find better ways to deliver mental health and substance abuse treatment to young people who need it.

Before I close I would like to take a moment to again thank a few key staff members who both I and the youth we serve rely on.

Rick Harrison is the director of the DJJ office of Behavioral Health Services and Miguel Fernandez is the office's assistant director. Thank you Miguel for that introduction again. They are key in providing

mental health and substance abuse services to youth in the juvenile justice system.

(Single out any other appropriate staff in attendance)

Thank you once again for the opportunity to speak today, and welcome once again to the conference.