

2015 Nomination for the Northern Region – Columbia County

The key purpose of Columbia County CJAB is to organize and share information and ideas and to promote collaboration for the improvement of the county's criminal justice system. The Columbia County CJAB celebrated its ten year anniversary in 2014 by hosting the Pennsylvania Mental Health and Justice Center of Excellence (COE) to conduct a Cross-Systems Mapping Workshop and contracting with an independent consultant to help update their three-year strategic plan.

As the Columbia County CJAB updated their priorities and strategic plan, members celebrated and recognized all of their preceding successes including the development of the 26th Joint-Judicial District Treatment Courts. The Drug Treatment Court became operational on October 26, 2010, followed by the DUI Treatment Court on March 27, 2012. Montour County began adding participants to the Treatment Courts in April of 2012.

The 26th Joint-Judicial District Treatment Courts were started with a Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) grant and since inception; they have held three graduations for a total of 18 graduates. Currently, there are approximately 42 active participants in both Courts.

It is one of the CJAB's ongoing priorities to fund the Treatment Courts through a variety of sources, including grants, fees, and government funding. In 2014, Columbia and Montour County CJABs collaboratively applied for and were awarded their first County Intermediate Punishment grant to help support and grow their Treatment Courts.

In addition to the Treatment Courts, the CJAB wanted to support other programs that help manage the ongoing issues of substance abuse; therefore, it was decided to actively participate with Berwick Anti-Drug Alliance (BADA). The Alliance has three main objectives: to raise awareness of issues related to drug addiction; identify resources available to the community; and provide hope to all those affected by addiction. Currently in their fourth year, BADA meets the third Monday of every month. The Alliance has been so successful that it has been invited to talk in neighboring counties, with many CJAB members attending as presenters.

As the CJAB grew, members decided to focus on re-entry services, in particular housing for the justice-involved. Under the leadership of Judge Gary Norton, the CJAB created a Justice Housing Subcommittee that consists of key individuals from the criminal justice system, the local housing authority, and community service groups such as AGAPE, a faith-based mission providing various community programs, Central Susquehanna Opportunities, Inc. (CSO), the local community action organization, and Columbia, Montour, Snyder, Union (CMSU) Service System. Together, this subcommittee created the Justice Housing Program, funded through Emergency Solutions Grants and justice housing funds administered by the Columbia County Housing Authority. The program targets individuals through the county probation and parole office and in the county prison who are in need of assistance with housing services. The program helps pay rent and utilities for up to six months while providing life skills and re-entry services such as time management classes, GED instruction and testing assistance, rental classes, all partnered with regular probation visits and supervision in the home. The subcommittee now realizes they need to expand the program to include master leasing to be able to provide homes for those

individuals who cannot secure a rental property on their own. To help expand the program and start master leasing, the CJAB recently applied for a grant through PCCD.

Continuing with re-entry priorities, the CJAB supported a Therapeutic Re-Entry Community at the Columbia County Prison. The new and innovative program was scheduled to start in February of 2015. The goal of the program is to assist offenders in the acquisition of pro-social skills needed to function as sober, law abiding and contributing citizens of the community. The program will offer a therapeutic milieu focusing upon: life skills, job skills, parenting, anger management, drug and alcohol intervention and education, thinking error reduction and overall healthy living. The community setting housed within the prison, allows the offender to not only learn the skills but to practice those skills productively, 24-hours a day. Numerous community based organizations will be working with the Columbia County Prison Therapeutic Re-Entry Community including CSO, AGAPE, and CMSU.

The Columbia County CJAB includes local school officials as part of the Bridge Communication to Schools and Social Services Subcommittee. Originally, the subcommittee was created out of concerns from county schools that the issue of truancy was handled differently by Magisterial District Judges (MDJ). Additionally, agencies such as Children and Youth Services and the county's Juvenile Probation Office felt truancy was handled in different ways from school district to school district plus sometimes even building to building, within the same district. The CJAB subcommittee worked together with schools and MDJ offices to create a county-wide policy and template to manage truancy more efficiently.

As the subcommittee progressed, it started to support other school projects including the "Panther Pack" program out of the Bloomsburg School District. Panther Pack is a pilot project, supplying take home meals for kindergarten and first grade students over the weekend and holidays, ensuring these students have nutritional meals outside of school. The project was scheduled to start in February of 2015, with approximately 60 students signed up to participate. The ultimate goal is to expand the program, as capacity builds, and make it a kindergarten through 12th grade program county-wide.

One of the valuable CJAB-community relationships is the CJAB's partnership with Bloomsburg University and their Center for Community Research and Consulting. University students and staff have assisted the Columbia County criminal justice system with a couple of research projects. Together with CJAB members, the Bloomsburg Police Department and University students conducted a parking study of downtown Bloomsburg to help create a long-term plan for parking improvement. Students and staff worked closely with the Treatment Courts to conduct a process evaluation of both the Drug and DUI Courts, making recommendations to improve the processes within the two Courts. Annually, Bloomsburg University works with local service agencies and the criminal justice system to host a Regional Homelessness Summit where PCCD has been asked to present in the past. This past year, Bloomsburg University graciously provided a free meeting space for the CJAB's Cross-Systems Mapping Workshop, along with all printed materials.

As a result of the Cross-Systems Mapping Workshop, the CJAB and community members identified the following priorities: increase behavioral health training including the exploration of creating a Crisis Intervention Team (CIT); expand housing options; and grow existing and development of new diversion programs including a study of a Mental Health Court specialty track, operated under the present Treatment Courts.

In addition to the priorities and goals identified during the cross-systems mapping, members decided on the following CJAB priorities to work on over the next two years: collaboratively, the CJAB and community are looking at the feasibility of creating and operating a Day Reporting Center; continue to bridge communications between the schools and social services and investigate education programs to identify and address rise in juvenile anti-social behavior and criminal activity; increase community education on subjects such as gang and drug-related crimes, driving under the influence (DUI), and use of synthetic and prescription drugs; improve CJAB communications to local public; reinforce victims services' resources to improve the program to support victims of crimes and witnesses and educate them on the criminal justice system and legal processes; expand housing options for all returning citizens; concentrate on re-entry services including mentor program and skills training and employment assistance; complete implementation of video-conferencing across county; conduct technology evaluation of Emergency Services/ 911; look at county-wide uniform records management for all criminal justice offices; and continue to explore local law enforcement regional information sharing system along with installing computers in all sheriff, probation, and municipal police vehicles.

It is important to note the Columbia County CJAB has the support and assistance from all three county Commissioners – with two Commissioners attending almost every CJAB meeting. The Commissioners have been receptive to examining current practices in the criminal justice system and making changes to save taxpayer dollars and improve offender-related services. Furthermore, one of the things the CJAB is most proud of is their collaboration. President Judge Thomas James once said during a CJAB meeting, he is proud of the collaboration between the criminal justice agencies and the community organizations. He feels the CJAB addresses issues collaboratively. He admitted there is room to improve but feels the CJAB is the most important group in the community.

It is for these reasons, that Columbia County is nominated for the 2015 CCAP CJAB Best Practices Award.