

Testimony  
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House Corrections and Juvenile Justice Committee  
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Overview of Court Services Operations and Programs

Role of Court Services in an Urban District

By way of introduction, I am Kathleen Rieth, Court Services Administrative Officer for the 10<sup>th</sup> Judicial District (Johnson County) Court. I began in 1977 as one of the first two staff hired to do custody evaluations. I left Court Services for a short amount of time but returned in 1983, working in the juvenile unit. Prior to promotion to my current position I also worked part time hours in the adult unit as a bond supervision officer for approximately four years. Consequently, I have firsthand knowledge of the multitude of roles that a CSO plays in this office.

ADULT: The adult unit of Court Services provides the following services:

- Bond Supervision (monitoring defendants for misdemeanor and felony offenses while the cases are pending and can last up until sentencing)
- Pre-Sentence Investigation (nine staff including a supervisor perform the task of thoroughly investigating defendants' prior records and the status of the current case for sentencing hearings)
- Probation Supervision (two units handle misdemeanor and felony cases. Specialized caseloads include: sex offenders, drug charges including prescription fraud, mental health clients, fraud cases, domestic violence, etc.)

DOMESTIC: The domestic unit of this office provides a variety of services to couples who are separated or divorcing to help resolve custodial issues. The following services are provided:

- Mediation (staff work with divorcing or separated couples in an attempt to help them resolve custodial and visitation issues for their minor children)
- Custody Evaluations (staff meet with families, do home visits, contact references, and compile detailed reports to the family court judges to make recommendations about custody and visitation issues)
- Educational Classes (Higher Ground, a six session program for high conflict families to help them work together in a better fashion in the best interests of their minor children, Solid Ground, a two session program for parents early in the court process to provide guidelines on how to interact effectively in the best interests of children)
- Supervised Visitation (a 12 week program that provides structured visits for a parent who has court ordered supervised contact with the child in a safe environment; the program includes an educational component for both parents)

- Supervised Exchange (a program to help parents make exchanges of children in a safe, non-confrontational and child friendly environment)

JUVENILE: The juvenile unit of Court Services provides the following services:

- Juvenile Intake and Assessment Center (JIAC) assessments (for youth arrested by law enforcement but who are given a Notice to Appear and make contact with JIAC for an assessment)
- Case Management (a voluntary program for youth who are assessed at JIAC and prior to final disposition/resolution of their case to assist youth in early referral and access to services as an early intervention, with an effort to avoid law violations while their case is pending)
- Youth Court (for lower level first time juvenile offenders who are sent before a panel of their peers rather than having cases referred to the district court, with a special program for youth referred for Truancy—School Kids Impacting Peers or SKIP)
- Diversion (for juveniles who are first time offenders, which can include both felony and misdemeanor cases, in which they have conditions to complete and are monitored for compliance of these conditions; charges are dismissed upon successful completion of the diversion contracts; a special drug court program is also available for youths with serious substance abuse issues as well as a new Minor in Possession pre-diversion for low risk juveniles)
- Pre-Sentence Investigations (staff meet with the youth and parents, and gather background information, including prior legal history in order to submit detailed reports to the court and provide recommendations regarding sentencing)
- Probation Supervision (staff are school based and meet with the youth on a regular basis per risk level to ensure compliance with probation; specialized caseloads exist for sex offense, mental health and arson cases)
- Truancy Supervision (staff supervise juveniles who have been found to be Children in Need of Care due to truancy issues to ensure compliance with court ordered attendance at school)

Court Services in Johnson County has been a pilot site in both the adult and juvenile units for Evidence Based tools such as the LSI-R and the YLS-CMI. On the adult side, the LSI-R is completed prior to sentencing for felony cases and determines whether the client is supervised by Court Services or the local Corrections office, and post sentencing with misdemeanor cases. On the juvenile side, the YLS-CMI is completed for post sentencing in most cases. Should a youth be referred back to court for a revocation, the YLS-CMI score is utilized to advocate for a higher level of supervision for youth who have a high likelihood to reoffend. In both the adult and juvenile units, case plans are developed for those scoring above the low range to help the client work on issues that place him or her at greater risk to reoffend.

Caseloads at Court Services in the 10<sup>th</sup> are high; adult probation caseloads are distributed so that those with an extremely low LSI-R score are supervised by 3 staff whose caseloads are

very high (425 for one officer and 200/officer for the other two). Ranges for the other staff are from about 110 to 135 clients per officer. Bond supervision officers have about 85 clients per officer, of which two-thirds are seen twice a month based on their bond screening risk assessment. Juvenile diversion staff have average caseloads of about 85 to 90 cases per officer and juvenile probation have about 60 to 70 cases per officer. It is extremely important to use risk levels to set priorities for frequency of contact with clients, which is why some staff have extremely high caseloads for clients who pose a lesser risk to reoffend. We have very much come to appreciate that people who pose a lower risk to reoffend should not be over supervised and the importance of reserving the highest supervision agency for those who pose the highest risk to be future law violators.

The staff work longer and harder today than ever before to try to help clients make meaningful changes in their lives. They maintain contact with treatment providers, monitor drug screen results for those on random drug screening, and make contact with law enforcement agencies across the metropolitan area when concerns regarding clients' conduct is identified. The juvenile staff are in constant contact with the school staff where the youth they supervise attend. By the time a CSO refers a case back to court for revocation other than for a new law violation, all other resources have been exhausted. Staff try many in-house sanctions or assist clients with referrals to resources before referring people to court. Due to high caseloads, probation staff do not make home visits as part of the standard supervision practice.

Johnson County is a resource rich community. We have a provider monitor who enforces the chief judge's requirements for providers who are on the court-approved lists. Many agencies and individuals wish to be on the court-approved list, but it is extremely important to ensure that our clients are protected by having reputable and competent caregivers. These providers complete drug/alcohol assessments, substance abuse education and treatment, anger control assessments, anger control groups, sex offender assessments and sex offender treatment, etc. The providers meet quarterly to help develop the criteria for the court approved provider lists and to discuss problems, recent trends, etc. It is extremely time consuming to manage these programs. For example, the juvenile drug/alcohol provider manual is about 85 pages long; consequently, ensuring compliance with the requirements for all these services can be difficult.

Although we do have a large number of treatment providers who offer a variety of programming, not every client is able to make use of these programs for a variety of reasons. Many people who have limited financial means do not qualify for Medicaid. Yet even with reduced rates a number of these clients cannot afford treatment or lack transportation to obtain treatment. Clients who have substance abuse issues also pay for random drug screening which is another cost that they at times have difficulty paying. However, for many clients, drug screening plays an important role in helping to get them to quit using illegal substances. The changes in mental health have reduced the role that our Johnson County Mental Health Center now plays in dealing with clients such as outpatient substance abuse treatment and sex offender treatment.

At Court Services we deal with a variety of types of cases. It should not be construed that just because we are the first tier of the correctional system for juvenile and adult matters that we only deal with minor cases. The bond supervision staff have dealt with clients who were ultimately sentenced to the correctional facilities in Kansas. The probation staff at times have clients who may have misdemeanor convictions for charges that were much more serious but for a variety of reasons pled to less serious charges. One recent review of this showed that 22% of the misdemeanant criminal cases began as a felony charge. We use tools such as House Arrest, SCRAM (the continuous alcohol monitoring program) and random drug screening to ensure compliance with court ordered conditions and assist clients in making proactive changes in their lives.

Even some of the misdemeanor clients we work with can pose serious problems. Staff have been threatened at times. On multiple occasions some of the clients under our supervision commit new law violations of a serious nature, including: CSO Sharp's client who murdered someone within a few months of placement on probation, CSO Matthews' client who raped and killed the victim in his case, CSO Bartlett's client who killed his victim and cut open her stomach, CSO Gibson's client who killed his girlfriend and her child, CSO Easley's bond client who killed two Edwardsville EMT's and chopped their heads off, and CSO Daniel's client who killed his tenant. The juvenile who was convicted of killing his case manager, Terri Zenner was on juvenile supervision at the time of her murder. A number of us, including myself, have had clients commit suicide while under our supervision.

The staff who provide mediation to the Family Court Judges also deal with high conflict in their conference rooms. At times our security guard intervenes with angry clients. The Olathe Police Department has been called to respond to situations in which one or both of the parties of these civil cases lost control.

This office does not have a specialized CINC unit such as many of the larger Court Services offices have. However, if the court directs that a CSO be assigned to a CINC case, the CSO II in the juvenile probation unit would so assign the case. I was the assigned CSO for a child from the age of 6 years old until her late teens as directed by the juvenile judge, when SRS was unable to provide the supervision due to a technical issue.

At this office we strongly believe in providing services to our clients. Not only does the domestic unit provide special educational programming, but the adult probation unit offers a cognitively based educational class; the juvenile unit offers many groups, including a cognitive program, a girl's circle group, and an accountability/responsibility/choices class. We have close collaborative relationships with our partnering agencies, such as the local corrections office and the Juvenile Justice Authority. All the staff at Court Services have been trained in Motivational Interviewing. The juvenile staff just received training on Functional Family Probation (an Evidenced Based program) on January 31<sup>st</sup>. The adult staff who supervise clients will be receiving 1.5 days of training on Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS) on February 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>. We are also involved in a community effort with United Community

Services as the lead agency on Trauma Informed Care. We try to balance helping our clients to improve their lives while being mindful of community safety. For example, on Halloween night, CSO Fleming hosts a required meeting for all her clients with sex offenses from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. in which they are updated on treatment and legislative issues with a variety of speakers including some of our court approved sex offender treatment providers. The overall goal of the meeting is to ensure that children in the community are safer on Halloween night as well as to protect the clients from any allegations during this time period.

We have a highly educated and very experienced staff in this office. All staff have bachelor's degrees in a related field. Many have graduate degrees including master's degrees in psychology, counseling, public administration and social work; we also have two staff with Juris Doctorate degrees. All of the staff are involved in parallel committees, advisory boards or community groups and committees. Some of these groups have developed as a result of initiation by a staff member here, such as the metropolitan Pre-Sentence Investigation (PSI) team, in which PSI writers from across both sides of the state line meet periodically to collaborate with one another in the shared goal of providing the most accurate and up to date information for sentencing hearings.

As you can see we play a variety of roles here at Court Services. In order to provide the many services which our Judges have come to expect and which hopefully lighten their loads, we've had to develop creative ways to add services. While the majority of staff here are state employees of the Kansas Judicial Branch, a number of staff are in positions funded by grants or fees. As a result we have requirements to provide statistical and financial reports for these programs. We have learned to work smarter and harder over the years, in a county that has grown by over 10,000 people per year and with limited staff resources. Our district is going paperless in almost all areas, which creates new challenges for staff, particularly when they are in the field.

I am probably not doing adequate justice to the many services provided by the wonderful staff at my office. You will find our office open from 7:00 a.m. to late evening most weekdays to accommodate our clients' schedules and to provide numerous programs. These dedicated public servants take their roles very seriously and consider it an honor and a privilege to work for the State of Kansas and specifically for the judges in the 10<sup>th</sup> Judicial District. They can see the positive changes that their clients make such as our drug court diversion officer whose clients' grade point averages significantly improve as they quit using illegal substances. Staff are delighted when a client comes back and thanks them for helping them turn their lives around. We have a board at our office in which clients can acknowledge the partnerships with their CSOs. Even though their CSO may have been firm with them, they seem to realize that we also care and want to provide tools so that they can make positive changes in their lives, whether it's a parent who is disputing where their child will primarily live or an adult probation client. I will never forget my former bond client who hugged me when she came in to see her probation officer as she had been substance free for well over a year. I think that is the piece of this job

that keeps all of us hooked on what we do, helping people to make positive changes so they can reclaim their lives as well as helping to keep the community safer.

Respectfully,

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