

2023 Iowa Family & Youth Engagement Summit

Community Equity and Healing Award Winner

Scott County Youth Justice & Rehabilitation Center

This award celebrates an individual or organization who has done extraordinary work serving underrepresented communities. This individual or organization employs concepts focused on healing-centered engagement by addressing the importance of authentic identities and fostering belonging in the community. This individual or organization works to use genuine partnerships to serve communities, with an understanding that partnering with those individuals most impacted is critical to advancing justice and equity for all. These underrepresented communities may include girls/ young women, LGBTQ+, and people of color.

“Over the last several years, I have had the pleasure of watching the evolution of The Scott County Youth Justice & Rehabilitation Center which has been a true testament of what authentic youth and family engagement should look like. The leadership and staff in both the community-based programs and the detention center demonstrate passion and authentically committing themselves to bridging the gap between generations, creating meaningful connections, and empowering youth and their families in our community.

In fiscal year 2022, 73% of the youth admitted to the Youth Justice & Rehabilitation Center identified as youth of color. There has been a significant decrease in the number of youth admitted to the detention center over the last 5 years. In fiscal year 2018, 351 youth were admitted to the detention center and in fiscal year 2022 there was about a 45% drop to 157 youth. We certainly could attribute some of this to COVID but more importantly the organization increased the community services offered. The Center currently offers community-based services such as in-home detention, enhanced in-home GPS detention, auto theft accountability, youth centered planning meetings, school based restorative mediation, and most recently pre-charge diversion.

The Center’s leadership has spent time researching, developing, and implementing new strategies to support our youth of color in the community. The approach has been focused on how to engage and empower the youth and families to accept interventions and create environments both in detention and in the community that are inclusive and supportive; leading to stronger social cohesion.

The Youth Justice and Rehabilitation Center staff have focused on empowering youth for success in school, home, and the community. The staff focus on inspiring and empowering the youth by providing mentorship, educational opportunities, and platforms for their voices to be heard.

In fiscal year 2022, the school-based Restorative Mediation Program served 570 unduplicated youth with 94% completing mediation successfully. There were also zero instances of further fights after completion. The staff providing these services not only provide mediation in the schools, but frequently you will find them checking in with youth after services or the youth reaching out looking for additional guidance and support. Staff have continued to mentor some of the youth months after the services have ended to help the youth stay focused and on track. This program also accessed available funding to expanded connection to pro-social services in the community. Recently, they provided 100 summer passes in the Davenport area which included access to the YMCA, swimming pools, museums, and baseball games.

86% of the youth who’ve successfully completed the Auto Theft Accountability program have not reoffended 6 months post program completion and 79% of youth have not reoffended one (1) year post program completion.

In the detention setting, staff have been able to engage the youth and uplift their voices to provide feedback and ideas to new strategies such as Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS). PBIS is an evidence-based incentive model aimed at focusing on youth's strengths and positive reinforcement. PBIS implementation phase began in January 2022 and it's the first detention center in Iowa to implement this model. The staff can now be seen as more of a coach than a referee in the detention setting. By developing healthy and positive relationships with the youth and their family, it has allowed for shared ownership in creating a safe and healthy setting. The youth assisted in creating their new point sheets and incentives that strictly focus on positive reinforcement as opposed to a deficit-based approach. One major impact to this new system has been in room confinement, which has decreased by 99%, averaging at just about 1.35 hours per month in 2023. Since implementation, the Center has seen about a 60% decrease in staff assaults and school refusals have been cut in half.

The detention center also offers the youth opportunity to engage with other volunteers outside of the detention center. It's rare that the center doesn't have volunteers actively participating in weekly activities such as trauma informed yoga, Life's of Legacy, Spirituality groups, and young men's groups. This allows for the youth to have positive trusting relationships with community members when they are released from detention. When youth have experienced transferring from detention to a more long-term out of home placement, it's not uncommon for the detention staff to continue to stay a part of the youth's treatment team whether its communication by phone or approved visits in the new setting.

Through these interventions, youth and families are positively impacted by increasing the number of formal and informal supports, connecting to long term resources, engaging in pro-social activities, and becoming more self-aware of their strengths, talents, and skills.

In a previous position, I was able to hear firsthand from youth and witness the Youth Justice and Rehabilitation Center staff employ key elements to authentic youth and family engagement such as nurturing strong family bonds and empowering youth for success. The staff have been committed to fostering strong familial relationships. They promote open communication, respect, and mutual support among family members. Although, their services are geared towards working with the youth individually, the staff take the time to build relationship and trust with the caregivers as they recognize that a resilient and a united family unit forms the foundation for positive development. With this type of focus, the staff have been able to connect the youth and families to longer-term services to meet and address the underlying issues.

The staff help foster new relationships between the family and providers by taking time to build trusted relationships between themselves and other providers. For example, diversion staff meet bi-monthly with various service providers and school liaison's allowing them to discuss successful approaches working with specific youth and families and for shared accountability to helping the youth be successful in the school settings. Leaders in the diversion services have also spent time providing training opportunities to other professionals on how to effectively engage youth and their families in services.

The Scott County community is very fortunate to have the Youth Justice and Rehabilitation Center as partners in the juvenile justice continuum of services where there is a shared vision of authentic youth and family engagement. This type of partnership and collaboration will increase our initiatives to help address social issues, reduce youth vulnerabilities, and increase community resiliency."

~Stephanie Hernandez