

Chester County Juvenile Probation

Youth Level of Service Assessment

Background:

In 2012, Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System adopted the use of Evidence Based Practices (EBP) to enhance their mission of Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ).

- This means that Juvenile Probation Officers use tools and strategies which are shown, through research, to be effective in preventing juveniles from becoming re-involved in the system.
- Juvenile Probation Officers now use a **structured decision making** tool called the **Youth Level of Service (YLS) risk assessment**.
- When the YLS is used in conjunction with professional judgment, Probation Officers are able to get a clearer picture of a juvenile's strengths and/or the behaviors likely to put them at risk to re-offend. This helps Probation Officers create fair, appropriate and individualized case plans for each juvenile and their family.
- The YLS will help the Probation Officer decide if a juvenile presents as a low, moderate or high risk to re-offend based on the scores in each of these domains. This will determine the level of supervision the juvenile receives from their Probation Officer.
- The Probation Officer will also identify the areas in which the interventions should be targeted. These are the "need" areas. Strengths are also identified during this process and Probation Officers will try to build on these during the course of the juvenile's supervision.

Behaviors that are categorized as risks and/or strengths are organized under eight areas on the YLS tool:

- Prior and Current Offenses
- Family Circumstances/Parenting
- Education/Employment
- Peer Relations
- Substance Abuse
- Leisure/Recreation
- Personality/Behavior
- Attitudes/Orientation

In order to complete the YLS assessment, Probation Officers must collect important information from the juvenile and their family.

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The Probation Officers will also speak to others involved in the juveniles' case, such as school personnel, police officers, victims and service providers.

Lastly, any other factors that could impact how the juvenile participates in any interventions will be identified and planned for. These are called "responsivity" factors and they can include things like motivation, maturity, mental health diagnosis, IQ, etc... The Probation Officer will develop activities or goals for the juvenile's case plan based on these factors:

- Risk
- Need
- Strengths
- Responsivity

Here is an example of how this works:

A family comes in for an initial interview with the Probation Officer. During the course of the interview, parents and juvenile (John) report that 3 close friends of John are also on probation and all have a history of using drugs and alcohol.

Overall, John is a low risk on the YLS but he is high risk in the area of Peer Relations. (Risk)

John is spending his free time with peers who have negatively influenced his decision making. He needs to develop more positive peer relationships and make better decisions. (Need)

John indicates that he belongs to a youth group but has not attended for a few months. (Strength)

John has been diagnosed with ADHD but is not taking his prescribed medication. (Responsivity)

How the Probation officer responds:

- John is ordered not to associate with negative peers.
- The Probation Officer works with the family to ensure John is taking his medication to help control his impulsive behaviors.
- Together, John and his Probation Officer identify a case plan goal for John to attend youth group at least once a week as a way to develop more positive peer relationships.
- Once John's impulsive behavior has been stabilized by his medication, the Probation Officer works with him on practicing skills that will help him with decision making and identifying the influences his peers have on his behavior.

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Elements of Evidence Based Practices Used in the Juvenile Justice System:

- Motivational Interviewing
- Structured Decision Making
- Case Plan Development
- Skill Practice
- Cognitive Behavioral Interventions
- Service Provider Alignment
- Use of Graduated Responses
- Data Driven Decisions
- Policy Alignment
- Family Involvement
- Diversion
- Continuous Quality Improvement

“Ultimately, juveniles must take full responsibility for their past actions and gain motivation and competencies to change their conduct in the future. Probation Officers, treatment providers, family members and other pro-social people in the lives of juveniles’ must take advantage of the best available research and knowledge as they work to reach these goals.”

Pennsylvania’s Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy: Achieving Our Balanced and Restorative Justice Mission Through Evidence-Based Policy and Practice, April 2012.