

Wraparound services in Multnomah County, Oregon:

Why don't they serve all juvenile offenders with disabilities?

Wraparound is a stepwise, strengths-based planning process that helps children and their families through periods of transition in the child or youth's life. Wraparound is available to youth with emotional and behavioral disorders in Oregon and provides a broad range of supports, including collaboration between people from different areas of family's life (e.g., teachers, therapists), identifying the child's strengths, determining goals and strategies for achieving them, and developing and implementing a mutually agreed upon plan (Miles et al., 2006; Oregon Health Authority, 2016). These services are particularly effective at helping youth with mental health needs transition from incarceration setting into civilian life. Multnomah County, Oregon (2020) states that Wraparound is designed for "when a child has needs that put them at risk for losing their home, school placement or connection to the community," yet youth with disabilities are notably excluded from state-based services. Without provision of these services, juvenile offenders with disabilities are at a disadvantage compared to the general population (Unruh et al., 2008). That is, unequal access to critical services represents a systemic inequity and injustice that necessitates disability rights advocacy.

To qualify for Wraparound in Multnomah County, the following eligibility requirements must be met: 18 years or younger, eligible for Oregon Health Plan (Oregon-based Medicaid), obtain a completed or updated mental health assessment within the last 60 days, have a qualifying mental health diagnosis, and be involved with multiple systems (e.g., child welfare, special education (IEP), substance use and addictions) (Multnomah County, 2020). This specific focus on mental health (and specifically emotional and behavioral disorders) is problematic for juvenile offenders with disabilities because youth with disabilities experience mental illness at a higher rate than the general population and are at an increased risk for acquiring it (Interagency

Working Group on Youth Programs, n.d.). Incarceration is a traumatic experience and excluding youth with disabilities from Wraparound services may exacerbate preexisting mental distress, leading incarcerated youth to access mental health services that were previously unneeded. This may ultimately lead to more difficult transitions from incarceration into civilian life, which is particularly alarming for youth with disabilities, who recidivate at nearly three times the rate of those without a disability (O'Neill et al., 2017; Unruh et al., 2009).

Mental illness is but one of many disabilities experienced by incarcerated youths. Wexler et al. (2014) synthesized 16 national studies and determined that 33% of incarcerated youth have an identified disability that would qualify them for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Of this 33%, only 18% youths had an identified behavioral or emotional disability. If this data were true of Multnomah County, for example, this would mean only 18% of juvenile offenders would qualify for Wraparound services (Multnomah County, 2020). Expanding coverage for Wraparound in Multnomah County may improve the outcomes for youth with disabilities who are transitioning out of incarceration by increasing access to these critical services. This is especially important for a population that is more likely to be underserved and dually stigmatized as both a juvenile offender and person with a disability (Sinclair et al., 2017). Getting juvenile offenders with disabilities the Wraparound services they need, when they need them, may ease the transition process, lead to better outcomes, and ultimately decrease juvenile recidivism.

References

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