

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**Centralized Pro-Active Approach  
To Servicing Juveniles**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College**

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September 2009**

## **ABSTRACT**

A centralized pro-active approach to servicing juveniles is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it will maximize police resources, facilitate the juvenile justice system, and provide a child-friendly environment for the ultimate client, the juvenile victim. This approach to handling juveniles is in line with the multidisciplinary team philosophy (Chandler, 2006). The team approach brings together resources and expertise in cases of child sexual abuse and serious physical abuse. Interagency processes and professional management in cases is critical. Maximizing resources, such as utilizing appropriate physical environments, facilitates prosecution. Ongoing cross training of all members of the multidisciplinary team is essential, and the needs of the child must be the center of these activities (Chandler, 2006). The team should also involve treatment of, as well as research on, child sexual abuse and serious physical abuse, which is critical to maintaining professionalism for the global assessment. The benefits of this cooperative effort (multidisciplinary team) allows for reduction and, hopefully, the elimination of interagency disputes. The creation of the National Children's Alliance and its accreditation process increased knowledge about the availability of victim resources to all Child Advocacy Centers (CAC) participants (Chandler, 2006). This method allows for sharing strengths and problems which enables the immediate referral of the victim and the family to the appropriate resource. An example would be the referral of clients to available psychological, psychiatric, and medical counseling.

The research examined the Corpus Christi Police Department (CCPD) team method, which utilizes a centralized pro-active approach to servicing juveniles. During

the 1990s, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) conducted audits in medium to large police departments in Texas. In 1999, one such audit entitled, *Achieving the Commitment, A Plan for Community – CCPD Collaboration*, determined that this department was in need of a family violence bureau to handle domestic violence issues. In order to accommodate this identified need, the juvenile bureau responsible for youth issues was transformed into the family violence bureau, and all duties related to juveniles were divided among the remaining criminal investigation division bureaus. In time, the net result was that no unified response for juvenile issues existed. The types of information used to support the researcher's position included personal interviews and the extensive research material available on the topic. These can be found in codes and advocacy group materials.

The recommendation drawn from this position paper is that the most effective way for a medium or large law enforcement organization to respond to juvenile issues will be through a centralized pro-active approach. The multidisciplinary team facilitates uniformity of process and eliminates redundancy as well as the revictimization of the client. It also will allow for better specific work unit accountability of performance.



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## INTRODUCTION

Exploring the complex subject of juvenile affairs can be difficult when considering that some issues are not criminal and others are. Generally speaking, a runaway is defined as a juvenile who left home without permission and does not intend to return. The incident of a runaway is a status offense and not a criminal matter (Texas Family Code, 2007).

A child runs away from home for a reason. If the child is in a nurturing environment with all his/her needs being met, the child would not run. It is generally accepted that children run away from something (Dedel, 2006). The key is to find out what is going on in their lives that made them want to flee their home. Society has a vested interest in finding out why children run away and then attempt to solve their problems. There are already certain infrastructures in place. Each school has a Communities in Schools (CIS) caseworker. According to Communities in School, a nonprofit agency that helps prevent children from dropping out of school, the CIS caseworker develops a one-on-one relationship with each child (Evaluation of Communities In Schools of Texas, 2008). The caseworker will provide a safe place for the child to learn and grow. CIS believes that a healthy start leads to a healthy future. CIS caseworkers help to see that the child receives a marketable skill upon graduation. Finally, the CIS program instills a desire in the children to give back to the community. CIS is already funded, and with assistance from the Texas Department of Families and Protective Services, a protocol could be worked out for children who are listed as runaways and be interviewed by the CIS caseworker. The interview would be a global assessment of their home life. Drug and alcohol issues would be addressed. This

would be true for either the child or the parent. If there was sexual or physical abuse in the home, then a report would be made to CPS and the local police agency for a joint investigation (Chandler, 2006).

The impact of runaways not only affects the community at large but also the budgets of police agencies that respond. Families are also impacted with the runaway episode when other siblings follow the same behavior of the runaway family member. Furthermore, criminal offenses ranging from criminal homicide to criminal mischief require investigation time for resolution. Different sizes of police agencies throughout the state of Texas respond to this issue using multitude methods.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) study, "Achieving the Commitment, A Plan for Community – CCPD Collaboration," concluded that the agency was in need of a special unit to handle domestic violence cases. The unit was to be called the family violence bureau and was formed by eliminating the juvenile bureau. Essentially, five different criminal investigation bureaus became responsible for juvenile "specific" crime investigation. Status offenses, such as runaway, were not deemed criminal and did not fit the decentralization of juvenile crime into major crime bureaus. Thus, they became non-prioritized and often the cases were not investigated.

Since 1999, the Corpus Christi Police Department has experienced difficulty with managing runaway reports and juvenile criminal related offenses. Furthermore, the department has struggled with the timely removal of returned runaways entries from the Texas Crime Information Center/National Crime Information Center (TCIC/NCIC) system. The primary reason for these problems is because there is no one unit

responsible or accountable for handling this service. The Corpus Christi Police Department should utilize a centralized pro-active approach to servicing juveniles.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Different sizes of departments have varying structures for processing juvenile offenses. Large departments, such as the El Paso Police Department, have specialized units to handle juvenile issues. In a personal interview conducted by this writer, Lieutenant David Ransom of the El Paso Police Department advised that his department has juvenile units assigned to each district to handle juvenile offenses (D. Ransom, personal communication, April 20, 2009). In another interview, Lieutenant Ron Flores of the Houston Metropolitan Police Department advised that his department, while large, was not tasked for this function and instead utilized a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Houston Police Department to handle their juvenile offense processing (R. Flores, personal communication, April 20, 2009). In the case of smaller departments, it is generally accepted that juvenile offenses are handled by officers who perform generalist assignments such as patrol officers. Each listed example operates on the premise of what works best for their jurisdiction.

At face value, it could be concluded that only operational concerns take priority as to what method any department utilizes for handling juvenile offense regardless of size. It is the counter position that considers other factors which impacts the juvenile offenses that needs review. During the early 1900s, the reformists in juvenile justice were determined to label juveniles as delinquent and requiring judicial intervention for redemption. This was accomplished through new definitions of criminality, reform schools, and the courts. Ultimately, juveniles were labeled by this reform movement



(Platt, 1977). When considering economic stressors, high school dropout rates, and trends of high pregnancies, the case seems made for improving the approach for handling juveniles. Failure to explore and improve the system could be interpreted as writing off a whole generation or, to make finer point, genocide (Krisberg & Austin, 1993).

The counter argument calls for reinventing the police approach to handling juvenile offenses. If the observation is valid that indiscriminant labels result from police contacts and intervention, the alternative would be to remove the police from the process. This school of thought would mean that another process or social entity would have to replace the law enforcement component. An example of this type of entity would be the Texas Department of Family and Regulatory Services.

The counter argument is nonsensical. When dealing with juvenile offenses, there are two general areas requiring some type of police response. The first deals with delinquent conduct that violates penal law and is punishable by imprisonment. The second situation deals with conduct indicating a need for supervision, which is commonly referred to as status offenses. These are offenses applicable only to minors because of their age and are not criminal (Texas Family Code, 2007). The need for police action in either the delinquent conduct or conduct indicating a need for supervision becomes evident during confrontation situations. When a call is made to a residence for domestic violence where a son or daughter is out of control and assaults their family, only a police response can defuse the situation. When police respond to a criminal call, such as a robbery or burglary in progress, only a police response can safely apprehend the offender and restore peace. Considering the combination of

human nature and potential criminal as well as non-criminal behavior, police are an essential component to resolving the situation. The ultimate question is how police should accomplish this task in the best interest of the community and juvenile.

## **POSITION**

Juvenile behavior ranges from criminal conduct to status offenses. Police organizations that attempt to decentralize juvenile policing have an impetus of facility, legal, and case management priority when dealing with the event of a runaway. A law enforcement agency that routinely deals with runaways should have a centralized juvenile investigation section. A centralized organizational approach allows for specialized investigatory personnel to remain cognizant that status offenses are the gateway for delinquent behavior. Also, the centralized process would provide the department with the opportunity to select personnel who could compete for the assignment, which demonstrates their motivation. Juveniles that have repeated status offense contact with the police are often labeled by society (Garabedian, 1971). The focus of a centralized juvenile police unit is to deflect status offenders from delinquent conduct and provide organizational accountability for runaways via case management. This allows for investigational services away from adult career criminals.

The centralized juvenile police unit is organized as a separate command within the criminal investigation function. The juvenile police unit will have all requisite training for legal, procedural, and operational mandates by the Texas Family Code. It will have two subunits to emulate the Texas Family Code of major crimes (Delinquent Conduct Team [DCT]) and (Status and Minor Crime Team [SMCT]). The delineation of the two units places emphasis for the investigators approach to their work. The DCT is formed

around investigating the juvenile and referral to the courts. The SMCT is formed around court-ordered diversion and accountability of runaway investigations. The latter is the central point to this paper.

Finally, the reorganization will facilitate the multidisciplinary team philosophy, like the utilization of Communities in Schools (CIS) and other advocacy groups. As an example, all schools in the Corpus Christi Independent School District (CCISD) have specially trained staff assigned to them for intervention with problem children.

Advocacy centers, caseworkers, or specially trained staff may provide a child-friendly environment. CIS believes that a healthy start leads to a healthy future. A goal of the program instills a desire in the children to give back to the community. Furthermore, drug and alcohol issues would be addressed as a coexistent causal factor. This would be true for the child, the parent, and family unit. As earlier written, if there was any indication of sexual or physical abuse, the joint investigation team should be utilized (Chandler, 2006).

## **CONCLUSION / RECOMMENDATION**

The centralized pro-active approach to servicing juveniles should be used by the Corpus Christi Police Department as well as other law enforcement agencies. The position is founded on the basis of the multidimensional issues involving juvenile behavior. Problematic juvenile behavior, delinquent conduct, and conduct indicating a need for supervision behavior, are symptoms of a family unit malfunction or disjointed juvenile justice structure. When dealing with runaway episodes, decentralized policing performance suffers from facility, legal, and management priorities. Medium and large police departments routinely deal with runaways. Each agency should have a

centralized juvenile investigation unit. A centralized organizational approach allows for specially selected personnel with specialized investigatory training for juvenile work. This includes networking relationships with the Texas Department of Family and Regulatory Services and child advocacy centers. In this structure, the multidisciplinary team investigators remain cognizant that status offenses are the doorway to delinquent behavior. Juveniles that have repeated status offense contact with the police are often labeled by society (Garabedian, 1971). The focus of a centralized juvenile police unit is to deflect status offenders from delinquent conduct. It also provides more accountability for runaways via case management.

The juvenile police unit will be centralized under a unified command in the criminal investigation division. The unit will be structured as a bureau and will have all the required training for legal, procedural, and operational guidelines that are consistent with the Texas Family Code. This operational bureau will have two distinct work groups to mirror the Texas Family Code of major crimes (Delinquent Conduct Team [DCT]) and (Status and Minor Crime Team [SMCT]). Delinquent or conduct indicating a need for supervision cases will have investigators that are specially trained. The SMCT is formed around court-ordered diversion and accountability of runaway investigations. The central point to this paper is the team concept of the SMCT.

The reorganization will facilitate existing school infrastructures such as the Communities in Schools (CIS) program. Newly assigned investigators of the juvenile bureau will be better prepared and trained to work with CCISD CIS. This will create a better team approach to tackling both delinquent and conduct indicating a need for supervision situations. In the event the CIS program reveals alcohol, drug, physical, or

sexual abuse, then a multi-dimensional approach that utilizes the SMCT services should be mandated.

The combination of all efforts from the newly structured juvenile bureau, CCISD CIS, and Texas Department of Families and Protective Services will improve the response to juvenile problems. The joint efforts remove criminal labeling and promote the juvenile's resolution to the issue that could be causing the runaway episode. The police organization has better aligned itself to the need for case accountability by case management review. Organizationally, the runaway case is never a high profile police case until the juvenile becomes a victim or offender. This is a "lose-lose" scenario. By structuring the juvenile investigation unit with the DCT and SMCT, it creates a "win-lose" with the DCT for major crimes such as Part 1, Unified Crime Report. The organization "wins" by investigating the juvenile with family code mandates that can withstand legal review. The juvenile "loses" as they are labeled and treated as a criminal. The SMCT is a "win-win." The organization is focused on reducing "status" recidivism, and accountability for each runaway is made to the officer investigating the case. The juvenile "wins" when they have been diverted and not labeled as a criminal.

Finally, police organizations working toward the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) certification will meet the standard imposed. At this time, the Corpus Christi Police Department is working toward this goal under the CALEA standards of July 2006 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. The Corpus Christi Police Department should utilize a centralized pro-active approach to servicing juveniles.

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