



Project *SUPPORT*

Overview

■ **Introduction**

Project *SUPPORT* – *Service Utilization to Promote Positive Outcomes in Rehabilitation and Transition for Adjudicated Youth with Disabilities* – is a statewide program designed to assist adolescents with disabilities who are paroled from the Oregon Youth Authority (OYA) facilities to return to their home communities and enter school and or work through the support of a transition specialist (TS). These TS's are employed by Education Service Districts throughout the state and “bridge” the gap between OYA and the community. Evaluation of the project indicates that these services are *promoting* participant’s engagement in work and/or school in the community and *limiting* returns to the correctional system.

Project *SUPPORT* is based on three years of planning and implementation and involves a unique collaboration of four state agencies: the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), OYA, and the University of Oregon (UO). The project is based on a strong research foundation demonstrating a clear need for this type of project; employs a pragmatic service delivery model which focuses on work and school achievement; and – as we stated above – is producing positive results which offer hope for this most challenging group and concomitant benefits to our state and its citizens.

■ **A Clear Need: The Research Foundation**

Project *SUPPORT* is based on a recently completed study of the experiences of more than 500 adolescents who were paroled from OYA and then returned to communities in Oregon: the *TRACS* Project (Transition Research on Adjudicated Youth in community Settings). More than half of the youth who were incarcerated had a special education disability and about 40% also carried a psychiatric disability. Far more of these young people than we would care to admit performed poorly upon their return to society. Specifically, after parole from OYA (a) few received services from community-based social service agencies, (b) almost 60% returned to OYA or were committed to the adult correctional system, (c) only a quarter enrolled in school and even fewer completed their education, (d) employment rates were disturbingly low – averaging less than 30%, and (e) only a portion—less than 35%—became engaged in either school or work. *Participants with disabilities were more likely than those without disabilities to return to the correctional system and much less likely to become involved in work or school.*

Other findings from the *TRACS* project, however, carry a positive message. It was clear that if these youth could remain in the community for one year after leaving a facility it was virtually certain that they *would not return to the correctional system*. Moreover, youth who become “engaged” in work and/or school immediately after leaving the correctional system tended to remain involved in those activities and out of the correctional system at a much lower rate than youth who are not similarly engaged after leaving OYA. *The effect of these positive activities was especially pronounced for participants with disabilities.* These results point to the critical juncture after youth leave OYA and the potential benefits of providing transition services to these youth – especially those with disabilities.

■ **Focus on School and Work in the Community: the Service Delivery Model**

In line with the *TRACS* findings, staff from ODE, VR, OYA, and UO developed Project *SUPPORT* carefully over a three-year period. The Project’s purpose is to provide focused pre-release training and coordinated planning of individualized transition services for incarcerated *youth with disabilities*. Project *SUPPORT*’s pattern of services assists youth to initiate positive engagement in employment or education services in the community. A transition specialist (TS) is the key staff person in the project.

Each TS works directly with the youth and OYA parole officer (PO) to develop a project transition plan that is coupled with the youth's reformation plan.

Based on these documents, the TS works closely with the PO to organize community services for the youth immediately upon their parole from the facility. These services include VR, a Workforce Investment Act agency, social services, mental health and/or chemical dependency treatment supports, and public employment opportunities. The TS works closely with each youth to assist him or her to re-enter school, secure and maintain competitive employment, and find a safe and viable living arrangement. These personal services typically last for several months to a year – a time frame that coincides with that critical adjustment period identified in the earlier research and discussed above. Currently, there are nine TS's located in youth correctional facilities and OYA parole offices across the state.

■ **Reason for Hope: Positive Results from Project SUPPORT**

A total of 225 youth have been served by Project SUPPORT from August 1999 through December 2002. The average age at entry into the project is 17.1 years of age. Seventy-eight percent (78%) are male offenders, 22% are female, and 26% are an ethnic minority. Currently, 93% of participants have a DSM-IV diagnosis ranging from substance related to personality related disorders and 53% of participants have a special education diagnosis; this includes 49% of youth who have co-occurring diagnoses of both DSM-IV and a special education diagnosis. Approximately 67% of project participants have had numerous foster care/group home placements prior to incarceration; 48% were first adjudicated between 12 and 14 years of age; and approximately 3/4 of all youth experienced problems in school and have a history of substance abuse prior to incarceration.

The “engagement rate” of Project SUPPORT participants (youth with disabilities of special education and/or DSM-IV diagnoses) at 2, 4 and 6 months from exit from the facility, was approximately 65% at each increment. The results from the TRACS project demonstrates that youth released from OYA without these specialized services achieve engagement rates of less than 35% -- well below that achieved by the youth in Project SUPPORT.

Project SUPPORT Engagement Outcomes			
Youth who are actively “engaged” in both employment and/or education soon after exiting close custody are more than 2 times less likely to return to a correctional setting (Bullis, Yovanoff, Havel, & Mueller, 2001*).			
Rate of Engagement for Project SUPPORT Participants			
<u>2 months</u>	<u>4 months</u>	<u>6 months</u>	<u>TRACS at 6 months</u>
61%	67%	61%	35%
Engagement = Employed and/or Enrolled in school & NOT incarcerated			
These rates indicate that Project SUPPORT services are assisting project participants to gain employment or become enrolled in school at a higher rate than TRACS participants.			
<small>*Transition Research on formerly incarcerated Adolescents in Community Settings (TRACS)—A study of 531 Oregon young offenders leaving youth correctional facilities.</small>			

Project SUPPORT's services address important risk factors associated with future criminal activity by the participants and thereby limit future costs related to incarceration. Currently youth served through the project are demonstrating positive engagement in school and/or work and saving approximately \$51,000 per year in potential re-incarceration costs. Although the long-term cost benefits have not yet been examined, other studies suggest that youth who become actively involved in a meaningful career are likely to continue on that path, greatly reducing their reliance on public assistance. Thus, there is considerable optimism regarding the immediate and long-term potential to affect the trajectories of the lives of these most challenging youth and the return that will be realized in terms of cost and public safety.