



# On Balance

Dane County Department of Human Services & Dane County Juvenile Court Program Publication

## IN THIS ISSUE:

Judge's Corner, cover page

Disrupting through Innovation: Parents as Peers, p.1

YJP Banquet & Awards, p.2

Family Teaming with LSS, p.3

YJP & YWCA 1<sup>st</sup> Youth Restorative Justice Training, p.3

Youth Justice Girls and Boys Summer Work Groups, p.6

Briarpatch Youth Services, p.9

Where Are They Now, p.10

## Judge's Corner

By Everett Mitchell

As I sat in my seat at the East High School graduation, I waited anxiously and patiently for a name that I called from the bench to join the chorus of high school graduates for the class of 2024. As she approached the line, I smiled, my heart leaping from my chest with so much joy because I realized, in a tear-drenched moment, she gives me hope. Bishop Desmond Tutu said, "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness."

The work many of us engage in can sometimes be filled with dark reminders that can rob our capacity to see the beautiful and powerful light. Even as we work through colorless and flavorless statutes and court orders, there are sparks that happen to keep us honest about the ongoing possibilities of light happening despite the darkness.

As a judge, I've presided over some dark cases that can leave you hopeless. But this day in a stadium full of optimism, I could sit and watch my hope restored because a bright light that fought through layers of darkness



and still emerged with a smile, with a joy, with a resilience that continues to inspire me to do this work with a renewed focus to see all the little lights that transform darkness.

## Disrupting Through Innovation: Parents as Peers in Child Protective Services

By Angie Sadler

The Federal Family First Legislation of 2018 has led to the creation of new pathways within the Child Protective Service (CPS) system with the ultimate goal of decreasing the total number of children in out of home care, as well as the length of time youth spend in placement. The research is clear: the best outcomes happen when we can find ways within the system to keep children with their families. One new pathway has been the creation of the Targeted Safety Service Funds (TSSF) Program in 2020, which has since expanded to all seventy-one Wisconsin County-run CPS agencies. The TSSF Program helps to mitigate financial stressors and assists with basic needs so eligible families can focus their efforts on increasing protective capacities and keeping children safe at home. Here at Dane County DHS, we have the first fully staffed TSSF Unit, partnering with Initial Assessment and Ongoing Social Workers to serve qualifying families who have an identified safety concern.

The TSSF Team is excited to be part of the many exciting initiatives happening within the Department to embrace the spirit of the Family First Legislation. The TSSF team consists of a Social Worker, Case Manager, and two lived experience Parent Peer Specialists. The peer model in CPS is similar to that in other peer model services, such as mental health or substance abuse, where someone with lived experience serves others as a mentor.

### ***What does a Parent Peer Specialist in Child Protective Services do?***

Have you ever had a crisis in life where you felt alone, like no one else understands what you are going through? Where people offer to help, but you are not quite sure who to trust and what to ask for? If fortunate enough to be connected to a supportive village, someone may come along and say, “I’ve been there, let me walk beside you”, and hope is restored just enough to take that first unknown step forward. The feeling of connection is powerful for all of us as human beings. It is with that intention that Parent Peer Specialists have a seat at the table of the Child Protective Services System. Parent Peers offer validation, understanding, and shared empathy during a crisis. They can listen and remind individuals of their strengths and successes. They are trained and certified to assist parents who are struggling to manage a child’s mental health symptoms or their own recovery. They are connected to a network of Parent Peers in other areas who offer ideas and suggestions that may be different from the expertise Social Workers bring to the table. At times they may challenge the status quo and offer creative solutions. To quote Dr. Stacker in the Spring Issue of the On Balance Newsletter, Parent Peer Specialists are “disrupting for good”!

If you are interested in reading more about the Wisconsin Targeted Safety Support Funds model, please click here: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cwportal/safety/tssf>

If you are interested in further reading on the Parent Peer Specialist model, please click here: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/cwportal/parents-supporting-parents>

# YJP Banquet and Awards Ceremony

By Paige Michels

The YJP Banquet and Awards Ceremony was held on Thursday, June 13 at the Warner Park Community Recreation Center. This year's awards focused on youth and caregivers who have shown exemplary resilience, determination, and positive growth in the face of adversity.

Keynote speaker Dominic Johnson shared his story of overcoming challenges to reach his goals and encouraged youth to be positive leaders in their communities. The night also featured opening remarks from interim county executive Jamie Kuhn, emceed by DCDHS program leader Joe Muellenberg, and closing remarks from YJ manager Andre Johnson.

The award winners of the evening were:

Coach Clauer "None in the Gap Award" – James Spinhirne

All-Star Award – Michael Garret Jr.

Leadership Award – Miguel Thomas

Phoenix Award – Maiyah Schlough

Most Improved Award – Eden Dregne

Young Professional Award – Fury Townsel

Positive Attitude Award – Christian Elliott

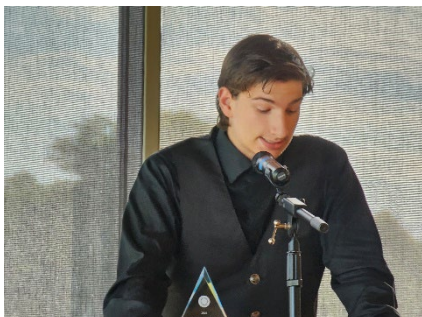
Improved GPA – Isiah Haynes

Stellar School Attendance – Kashton Sondreal and Alejandro Jackson

Outstanding Parent Award – Karlie Sondreal and Natalie Miller



Congratulations to all the award winners, and we look forward to seeing everyone at next year's banquet!





## Family Teaming with LSS

By Brenda Blanck

Lutheran Social Services (LSS) is the current provider for our CYF Family Teaming service. The previous contracted provider was Jeanne Ferguson with Family Group Conferencing. The LSS Family Teaming service aims to engage families by bringing the family's "team" together for the purpose of strengthening family capacity, building natural supports, and assuring safety over time. The team can include members the family identifies and can include other family, neighbors, friends, caregivers, community advocates, faith community members, etc. The assigned social worker is also a team participant.

The family team process is driven by what the family identifies as wanting support around and the people they want supporting them. Some examples include identifying supports around family interaction, potential placements, transportation, and childcare. The LSS family team facilitator prepares the family and all family team members for the family team meeting, facilitates the meeting, and provides some follow-up.

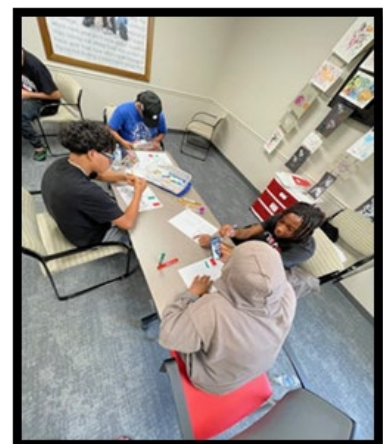
The WI Department of Children and Families (DCF) Child Welfare Transformation Family First model relies heavily on family and community involvement to improve outcomes for children and families in the child welfare system. The DCF Ongoing Standards that drive child welfare practice promote using family teams as a part of regular practice.

CPS and YJ staff are able to make referrals to the LSS Family Teaming service. The forms and process can be accessed in the Human Services H: drive database. Any questions about this service can be directed to the LSS Family Team Facilitator Carleigh Tucker ([Carleigh.tucker@lsswis.org](mailto:Carleigh.tucker@lsswis.org)) or CPS Manager Brenda Blanck ([blanck.brenda@danecounty.gov](mailto:blanck.brenda@danecounty.gov)). There will be quarterly meetings between LSS Family Teaming staff and Department social workers, supervisors, and managers to continually maximize this service for our community.

## DCDHS YJP Staff & YWCA Partner for 1st Youth Restorative Justice Training

By Amanda Wiza and Tonya Pollard

Dane County Department of Human Services Youth Justice's EISU team has been busy this summer with impressive youth programming. Recently, the unit partnered with YWCA for the first Youth Restorative Justice Training for 13 to 16 year olds. Over 30 youth participated over two weeks, exploring restorative justice circle keeping practices and opportunities. Youth learned what restorative justice is, how to integrate the practice in their lives, and local opportunities to use their new skills following the



training. YWCA Restorative Justice Staff delivered outstanding presentations and curriculum to the fully engaged youth present.

One participant encapsulated his experience, saying, *"I felt like the teachers (YWCA RJ facilitators) were 'for real' listening to me. Like they respected me. It made me want to talk more, and I'm not usually into all that. So I guess it was good."*



## GRIT Girls' Summer Work Groups

By Amanda Wiza and Tonya Pollard

In addition to co-facilitating the 1<sup>st</sup> Youth Restorative Justice Training, the GRIT-East and Lafollette team Tonya Pollard and Lizbeth Covarrubias hosted their annual summer workgroups. Each week featured a new theme with topics such as financial literacy, career readiness, healthy living, social and emotional learning, and community roles. The summer groups are in addition to work teams and one-on-one mentoring provided by GRIT workers all summer long. Overall, 60 youth were referred to the GRIT program for the summer!



## Briarpatch Pilots New Girls Group

By Amanda Wiza and Lex Ricci

From January through May 2024, Briarpatch, with the assistance of DCDHS staff, hosted a new Girls Group serving youth in our area. Briarpatch Staff Lex Ricci and Amber Nuon worked alongside DCDHS Youth Justice Coordinator Alex Maves to meet biweekly with 14 high school freshmen and sophomores. The group focused on social skill building to create positive peer relationships and other life skills. Each session featured a new topic, including healthy relationships, self-care, conflict navigation, and communication/expressing emotions. These conversations occurred in large and small groups. At times discussions got heavy, allowing youth to process their experiences, whereas other conversations focused on the application of new skills. The girls put in the work and challenged themselves! Throughout the months, staff observed significant growth from all participants. The girls were asked to provide feedback regarding what they enjoyed in the hopes of having similar groups in the future. Staff plan to regularly check in with participants to keep the social connections developed strong!

## Spring & Summer 2024 Youth Justice & Prevention Boys' Groups

By Joe Muellenberg

Throughout this spring and summer, almost 30 boys have been involved in programs at Youth Justice & Prevention.

Program Leaders Choua Her, Jennifer Brown, Martha Vradenberg, Ricky Naylor, and Joe Muellenberg teamed up to run the high-risk groups on Mondays. Ricky and Joe lead the low/moderate-risk groups on Wednesdays with support of the Program Leaders and Youth Justice Coordinator Alex Maves. These groups provide a safe environment for boys to develop positive social skills, engage in enriching activities, connect with positive role models in the community, and have conversations about making better life choices, building healthy relationships, and taking on civic responsibilities.







During the spring session Wednesday groups, the boys participated in a variety of enriching activities, including educational field trips to UW-Madison, meaningful community service projects, cooking experiences, and guest speaker sessions. Some highlights include engaging with WorkSmart Network professionals about various careers, supporting a community event hosted by Mentoring Positives, and contributing to the maintenance and beautification of the Goodman Community Center garden.

This summer, the boys are involved in activities including fishing, cooking, gardening, and promoting the Parks Alive events on the Northside. They attended an insightful tour of Madison College and gained valuable insights into careers in the trades.



They also visited "Half the 40 Acres" farm with Robert Pierce (recently featured in Madison Magazine) to learn about their roots in agriculture as well as a thrilling culminating field trip to the Challenge Ropes Course at Madison College.

Group participants continue to build emotional intelligence and foster a supportive environment for sharing personal experiences within the group. Program leaders use the BITS curriculum to guide the boys through thought-provoking discussions, covering topics such as overcoming thinking traps, managing anger triggers, envisioning a bright future, and honing conflict resolution skills.

# YJP SUMMER WORKCREW 2024

By Ty Mahone

As we have done in past summers, the Department of Human Services CYF/YJ division continues with its tradition of providing opportunities and support for youth to grow! During the school year, YJ staff's primary focus is cognitive behavioral change, practice, and learning. This method of support helps youth better understand their thinking processes and choices when they are at a crossroads. During the summer, however, we are granted the opportunity to provide youth support in alternative ways.

I would like to give you a summary of the **MMSD GRIT WEST HIGH ENROLLMENT AREA** employment and training summer work crew. This crew is an opportunity to continue mentoring over the summer months, and also offer youth a supported employment experience sponsored by the County. Within this article, I will focus on the following areas: Programming, Achievements, Lessons Learned & Risk, and finally, Acknowledgement.



**Programming:** The WEST ENROLLMENT AREA work crew consisted of 13 youth. Students were interviewed by YJP Program Leaders and Briarpatch staff for this opportunity. Students are required to be 14 years old in order to be employed in this program and must have excelled in the group experience during the school year to be eligible. Students work 2-3 partial days per week, for a total of 8-14 hours per week. Their work time is divided between work-readiness training (provided by Briarpatch Youth Services), restorative justice mentorship and practice (provided by the YWCA), and food prep at Second Harvest Food Bank. This first-time employment opportunity program took place June 10-August 1, 2024 (8 weeks).

*Figure 1: Students working at Second Harvest Food Bank. Students are breaking down bulk cheese packages for redistribution to food pantries and families in the community.*

**Achievements:** There were many achievements made by students over the summer. I would like to share what was accomplished at Second Harvest Food Bank by sharing a recent email I received from Volunteer Services Coordinator Brie McNett:



*“Your recent gift of time was used to prepare food for distribution throughout our 16-county service area in southwestern Wisconsin. I am delighted to share that the 555 hours your group donated in June and July has an equivalent value at Second Harvest of up to 44,205 meals! On behalf of all those we work alongside, thank you for truly making a difference and supporting your community. We look forward to working with you in the future!”*

As a bonus for this achievement, students were given t-shirts from the organization, as this is a record accomplishment by a group. Dane County Youth Justice has appreciated the partnership Second Harvest has offered our youth throughout the years.



**Lessons Learned:** Throughout the summer, students learned both life and work skills within the program. Rather than giving my own opinion on things, I asked the members of the work crew to share their opinions. Three students volunteered to respond and for confidentiality, I will not identify them by name, but initials only.

*Figure 2: Students participating in Restorative Justice Mentorship Programming at YJP Building.*

***What would you say that you learned from this summer experience?***

**LH replied,** “I learned that it is very easy to get distracted and off task at work. I improved on that from day 1 and became more accountable.”

**AC responded as well.** “I learned what it’s like to supervise and help others with their work. It can be difficult at times but very rewarding.”

***What would you say was the most difficult part of this experience?***

**KM replied,** “The most difficult part of the experience was the UNKNOWN (meaning expectations, work responsibilities, teamwork, etc.). Once we were there a week or so, I caught on and it made things easier. Having this job and the work training has definitely made me more accountable.”

***What, if anything, could improve about this summer work experience for you or the program itself?***

**AC replied,** “I’d say NOTHING, as it’s been pretty smooth and good lately. Some people may want things changed but I think it is good as it is. Good opportunity for all of us involved.”

In summary, I witnessed growth in collaboration, attitude, and organization. Students learned about collaboration (working as a team to get things done), attitude (bringing a positive attitude toward new tasks, and seeing things from a different view point.), and finally, organization (in order to get things accomplished, students had to do work in a specific order).

**Acknowledgments:** Many studies have found that supported employment (SE) has effectively helped people obtain and maintain competitive employment. A variety of staff provided



support to this population throughout this summer employment opportunity. Thank you to our partnering agencies, **Briarpatch Youth Services (BYS)**, **Commonwealth Development**, **the YWCA** and **Second Harvest Food Bank** for providing the supplemental services needed to make this program a success. Lastly, I would like to **thank Dane County Department of Human Services, specifically the CYF/YJ Department**. A special thanks to **CYF Administrator Dr. Martha Stacker, Youth Justice Manager Andre Johnson, and Supervisor Heather Crowley**. Without their vision, this type of programming isn't possible.

*Figure 3: Students after completing their final "Work Readiness" Training with BriarPatch Youth Services BYS*

## Briarpatch Youth Services

Briarpatch Youth Services is a safe haven of resources, strategically focused on the best interests of the youth and their survival as productive and responsible citizens.

### Summer Sessions

This summer we introduced you to a few groups that are available to the youth we serve, primarily focusing on their mental health, self-awareness and financial capabilities.

**"Choices":** Choices is a group that focuses on a combination of Mindfulness, Peer Mediation, Recreational Activities and Service Projects as part of the group structure.

Group Testimonial, Youth (M, 14): "When I was first introduced to the group, I did not want to participate. My mind was set that this would be boring, or just like school. To my surprise, it was the total opposite. I wanted to actively participate in discussions. Which was different for me. I am usually nervous talking to people I don't know".

**"Girl F.L.Y. (First Love Yourself)":** A program that targets female youth with the mission of building character and leadership skills through activities, service to the community, social and recreational bonding, economic education and exploration.

Group Testimonial, Youth (F, 17): "It was a blessing to be introduced to the staff at Briarpatch and the facilitators of Girl F.L.Y. Losing my mother at an early age, living with a disability, and relying on my siblings for support has often been hard for me. Coming to Girl F.L.Y. group, I feel welcomed, I feel comfortable, and I have even made new friends outside my support circle."

**Youth Job Center:** Provides youth with the necessary tools to find and maintain employment through individual job search assistance, skills assessments, and job placement with other agencies within the community. Serving youth ages 14-21.

This summer over 40 youth were employed through the Youth Job Center program, working with Henry Vilas Zoo, Mallards Baseball, Memorial Union, and Frostwood Farms.

Group Testimonial, Youth (F, 17): “Although I was facing being displaced and without housing, this program gave me a sense of hope. Because of the job-ready trainings, I understood how important it is for me to obtain my G.E.D. in order to find employment. Today, I stand here a high school graduate with full-time employment. I know it’s not much, but it’s the jumpstart I needed for a better future.”

## Where Are They Now?

**We recently caught up with Wanda Wilkerson!**

**Wanda Wilkerson** was one of the receptionists at Dane County Human Services, coming to Dane County from the state in 1990 until she retired in 2009, working for DCDHS nearly 20 years. She worked primarily at the Park Street office but also helped at the Black Earth Office or wherever else she was needed.

*What have you been doing since retirement?*

I live in McFarland and have been busy being a roadie for a country/rock band called Jackie Marie and the Dance Hall Kings, who play around the area. I also am very active with Moose Club, an international organization that helps children and older adults. They have ‘Moose Heart,’ which is a place for children outside of Aurora, Illinois where they are taught everything they need to know to graduate and get funding for supplies and scholarships. It also provides for a senior community called ‘Moose Haven’ just outside of Ocala, Florida. The local club donates to Second Harvest, does a lot of community service helping vets at the VA hospital, buys school supplies for kids, provides hats, scarves, mittens for kids, among other community service activities.. We are always looking for new members. Anyone interested can find out more information at <https://www.mooseintl.org/>



*What was your favorite part of working at Human Services?* I loved the people, both the clients who came in and the staff. Everyone was so easy to work with and work for. I loved the comradery and how everyone always helped each other. I liked how we always worked through things and still managed to have a good time. I really loved working at Human Services, miss everyone, and think of you fondly.



*What's a funny story you have from your time at Human Services?* People used to think it was funny that I'd come in early each day and look at the obituaries in the newspaper. I figured if I found myself listed, I didn't have to work anymore and could go home.

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