



Oregon

Kate Brown, Governor

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Oregon Youth Authority takes on ambitious project of training over 1,000 staffers on Positive Human Development (PHD), including at MacLaren

Culture of promoting healthy development for both staff and youth rolling out agency-wide

Last December when many Oregonians were shoring up last-minute holiday shopping and hosting get-togethers, a team of doctors, social scientists, researchers, and seasoned corrections officers were ramping up an ambitious plan to reform youth in Oregon Youth Authority (OYA) care and custody. Called Positive Human Development (PHD), the new culture is being rolled out statewide beginning this month.

Training is expected to be complete August 2015. From now until then, all of OYA's 1,100 employees will take turns participating in two days of workshops on healthy brain development, the benefits of providing low stress environments, and the importance of making opportunities for community engagement and caring, supportive relationships. The training is part of the agency's Youth Reformation System (YRS), which uses research and predictive analytics to help professionals determine the most effective placements and treatments for youth in OYA's custody.

PHD is diametrically opposed to the "old" way the justice system traditionally has operated, and instead is rooted in human connection. Rather than focusing on punishment, PHD focuses on helping youth develop the skills and maturity they need to lead positive lives while holding them accountable for their behaviors.

"While youth still have most of their lives ahead of them, there is ample chance to steer them toward productive, crime-free lives," said OYA Director Fariborz Pakseresht. "The more we are connected, the more effective we become."

Dr. Shannon Myrick, who led the team that developed PHD, has served as a developmental psychologist for almost a decade. "The population of youth in OYA's care and custody are mostly teens, and teen brains are still developing," she said. "In fact, people's brains don't fully form until the mid-20s, and teens simply cannot process information healthily if they go through trauma. High environmental stress,

little or no control in what happens in their lives, and no caring or supportive relationships are traumatic factors that plague almost 100% of our youth.”

Conversely, Myrick points out, environments with low stress, freedom to make reasonable choices, and opportunities for engagement and caring and supportive relationships, promote healthy brain development. This is the essence of PHD.

But treating youth with care and respect is only half the battle. OYA management maintains that PHD can't exist only between staff and youth. Staff need to use PHD tools with each other as well, in order to set a positive example for youth.

PHD is based on a five-level pyramid that drives all tenets of the culture. At the base is “Safety and Security,” and at the top is “Community Connection.” The other levels of the PHD pyramid are “Caring and Supportive Relationships,” “High Expectations and Accountability,” and “Meaningful Participation.” OYA staff will receive training on how to model, teach, and implement all five of these levels in their work with youth.

As the YRS/PHD trainers roll out the training, MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility is scheduled as one of the first stops. As the largest of the state's secure correctional facility serving juveniles, MacLaren is located in Woodburn where it's been since 1926 and has a capacity of 186 beds. Youth live in one of 6 units and may enroll in a number of vocational programs including welding, woodworking, grounds maintenance, building maintenance (e.g., electrical, plumbing, HVAC), industrial kitchen food preparation, and industrial laundry skills.

MacLaren is also the home of Project POOCH, a rehabilitation program where youth train and socialize rescue dogs. In the same vein, MacLaren youth also build doghouses and fences for Fences for Fido, a nonprofit group that helps dog owners give their pets a place to run with a fence, instead of being chained up. MacLaren also celebrated the anniversary of its “treatment mall,” in which youth can partake in personal wellness pursuits including book clubs, CrossFit, crocheting and access to a law library among other activities.

Superintendent of MacLaren Dan Berger said: “PHD is one element that makes juvenile justice so different here in Oregon. I think once we fully implement PHD, it will really connect through all areas of the operations, to include treatment, classroom education and vocational education, and toward successful reformation. We all benefit when we help youth achieve after they leave OYA and go on to lead productive, crime-free lives.”

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NOTE: Reporters may submit requests to interview to C. J. Drake at CJ.Drake@oya.state.or.us or by calling 503-385-5899.

The Oregon Youth Authority is the state's juvenile justice agency, promoting public safety and reducing victimization by helping at-risk young people lead productive, crime-free lives. Learn more at www.oregon.gov/oya and follow OYA on Twitter @OregonYouth.