

MULTISYSTEMIC THERAPY

Program Overview

Multisystemic Therapy (MST) is an intensive family- and community-based treatment that addresses the multiple determinants of serious antisocial behavior in juvenile offenders.

Program Targets: MST targets chronic, violent, or substance abusing male and female juvenile offenders at risk of out-of-home placement. Thus, a “typical” MST youth:

- is 14-16 years old
- lives in a single-parent home characterized by multiple needs and problems
- has multiple arrests/is a chronic offender
- is deeply involved with delinquent peers
- is experiencing problems at school or doesn't attend at all
- abuses substances (pot, alcohol, cocaine)

Program Characteristics: MST delivers intensive home-based services via therapists fully trained in MST and supported through weekly supervision and telephone consultation with an MST expert. Therapists carry a small (but demanding) caseload, and length of treatment averages 2 to 5 months. Within the MST model, therapists:

- conduct comprehensive functional assessments of youth in the context of their families, peer group, school, and neighborhood
- seek to understand the “fit” between the youth's problems and the factors which contribute to them
- empower parents to address the needs of youth (i.e., structure, support) more effectively
- focus on helping parents build supportive social networks in their community
- emphasize long-term change that families can maintain after their involvement in MST ends

Program Goals: MST “empowers parents with the skills and resources needed to independently address the difficulties that arise in raising teenagers and to empower youth to cope with family, peer, school, and neighborhood problems.” Within a context of support and skill building, the therapist places developmentally appropriate demands on the adolescent and family for responsible behavior.

Program Outcomes: Over \$10 million of rigorous, scientific evaluations of MST have shown:

- reductions in long-term rates of criminal offending in serious juvenile offenders;
- reductions in rates of out-of-home placements for serious juvenile offenders;
- significant improvements in family functioning;
- decreased mental health problems for serious juvenile offenders; and
- cost-savings in comparison with usual mental health and juvenile justice services.

Reasons for Program Success: Multisystemic Therapy views individuals as being nested within a network of interconnected systems that encompass individual, family, and extra familial (peer, school, neighborhood) factors. MST addresses the multiple factors known to be related to delinquency across the key settings, or systems, within which youth are embedded. MST strives to promote behavior change in the youth's natural environment, using the strengths of each system (e.g., family, peers, school, and indigenous support network) to facilitate change. It is believed that the focus on the known causes of delinquency, the delivery of services in the natural ecology, and the rigorous, monitored implementation of MST combine to produce the positive changes in youths and families.