

## **INTRODUCTION**

Scott Bakeberg, CEO, Village Ranch, Inc. and Village Ranch Child and Family Services, Inc. My education includes an Undergraduate Degree in Criminal Justice and an MBA in Business Administration. For 33 years, I have been employed at Village Ranch and, in that time, have had the opportunity to work in all of the direct care positions within the agency.

## **HISTORY AND PRESENT DAY**

Village Ranch originated in 1988 as a private nonprofit 501(c)3 corporation with a mission to open a 12-bed children's residential facility for adolescent males in Cokato, Minnesota. At the time of our inception the founders made the decision to seek licensure through the Department of Corrections and we have continued with that licensure to the present day.

Throughout our 35 years of existence, we have strived to provide client-centered programming that creates hope and promotes change for a better future for the clients and families we serve. This focus has allowed, with the direction of our inspectors at DOC and placing agents we work with, to expand to our current services which now include:

- Cokato: 34 residential beds for adolescent males
- Hutchinson: 12 residential beds for adolescent males
- Rochester: 12 residential beds for adolescent males
- Annandale: 16 residential beds for adolescent females

Additionally, we are licensed in the State of Minnesota to license foster homes. To date, we have over 40 licensed foster homes throughout the state, to which we provide support and case management for the residents in placement as well as the foster families. We started an outpatient mental health agency to provide mental health services and support to our residential facilities. It should also be noted, our agency has been accredited by other outside agencies including Council of Accreditation (COA) and AspireMN.

## **TOPICS FOR TODAY**

Three areas I would like to offer as provider's insight to this working group today:

1. Direct Care Staffing Challenges
2. Enhanced Support to Families
3. Current Continuum of Youth Services

**DIRECT CARE STAFFING CHALLENGES:** The taskforce is likely aware of the staffing crisis for direct care workers in our residential programs. This is a dire issue needing support and legislative action for higher rates of reimbursement. Without that support and action, we will continue to struggle to maintain staff and keep the doors open to provide the services our clients and families need. It is necessary to stress this point, funding to adequately compensate staff is critical.

That said, this is an opportunity to identify other areas of staffing which need attention. As providers our hands are tied regarding the hours and schedules we must require of our residential staff. It would be advantageous to look at expanding on the opportunities these positions provide given, I have always said, "This is one of the critical jobs where you can literally change someone's life every day you come to work."

It warrants the acknowledgement that due to these unfavorable working hours our hiring pool is going to be younger, less experienced staff. As a result, I am asking the taskforce to consider a few options which may make our direct care roles more appealing to the current and upcoming workforce.

1. We need the ability to pay employees a higher more competitive wage. That, of course, starts with reimbursement rates.
2. There needs to be a commitment to a higher standard of training. There would be a tremendous amount of value in establishing a youth care training institute that all Minnesota Licensed Residential Programs could utilize for staff training. This would provide that higher level of training which could be standardized across the agencies providing care. The current requirement vaguely identifies the

topic to be covered and does not specify requirements. A training academy would standardize training, make training more cost effective for the providers, and equip staff with knowledge that could be easily transferable in their day-to-day job.

3. The stigma of residential work needs to be altered. We should explore options that this is not a platform for working in the mental health field and rather make this a more specific profession. We need to work with our higher educational Institutes in the state to create a two-year vocational degree providing a pathway. Having academic training in a college would increase credibility to the value of this career and could transform the perception of direct care work in our residential programs.

**ENHANCED SUPPORT TO FAMILIES:** Increasing support for families who have experienced a disruption in their homes due to out-of-home placement is needed. Support would look to improve family-centered services and increase family engagement in the out-of-home placement and eventual reunification.

Currently, there is an abundance of community-based support programs for families who are at risk of an out-of-home placement. These programs are put into place with positive intentions to support families at risk for family disruption due to an out-of-home placement. CTSS, targeted case management, wrap-around services, mobile crisis, and day treatment have all been successful interventions. There has also been an attempt to implement federal legislation through the Family First Preservation Services Act to provide families resources for children who are at risk for out-of-home placements.

Most of what has been recently enacted into legislation in Minnesota has centered around prevention services to support families. These are all needed services to avoid potential disruptions in the families. It is my recommendation that more requirements are developed for the situation when a family disruption has occurred. This will ensure residential programs are working with the families of our clients prior to reunification. It should be a Childrens Residential licensing requirement for certification in our Rule 2960 outlining specific criteria for working with families prior to reunification. These requirements need to expand on the current regulations which have recently transpired to provide support for families. Current regulations merely address how there is a need to involve families in the treatment plan process (i.e., family therapy and other collaborations during the placement); however, consideration should be given to regulations for reunification.

This would be an opportunity to enact legislation into the current Rule 2960 to allow and encourage agencies to obtain a program certification specific to the work they are committed to do to in providing families wrap-around services and the most robust support during reunification.

It is also my recommendation there be an exploratory process which provides parents with accountability for increased investment in this process and ultimately provide our clients and the families with the resources necessary to reduce recidivism and reoccurring future family disruptions.

**CURRENT CONTINUUM OF YOUTH SERVICES:** It is critical we allow our clients and their families the most supportive and least restrictive environment based on the presenting issues.

Recent focus has been on building a robust community-based system to provide an abundance of services for opportunity to keep children with their families. This has been a very well-intended approach and has had many positive outcomes; however, I have reluctance in approaching juvenile justice as a “one size fits all” approach. Unfortunately, there are adolescents who need to be removed from their homes for a period. This allows for issues to be addressed in the safest environment and situation for all involved. This should be a last resort with careful consideration to a placement which would provide the least amount of disruption to all parties. For this to happen, Minnesota will need to retain the current continuum of services providing appropriate options for these placements.

This includes the need for placement options for adolescents who have participated in criminal behavior. These behaviors put the safety of the community in danger and require a secure setting. The

recent closures of the County Home School and Boys Totem Town have put significant strain on the continuum with the lack of secure options. A significant change in the placement options for secure settings for our most at-risk criminal adolescents is of critical importance.

It may be helpful to note, while the current perception is that DOC-licensed programs are only correctional, this is inaccurate. Residential programs are predominately overlooked as programs which can offer clients individualized/trauma-informed treatment.

As noted previously, Village Ranch has been licensed by the Department of Corrections since our inception in 1988. We have always looked to provide programming individualized to the needs of each client. Currently in our program, we have mental health professionals providing consultation in all our programming looking at the most appropriate evidence-based interventions based on a current diagnostic assessment. We offer weekly individual, group, and family therapy by a licensed mental health professional. Additionally, we provide weekly individual and group CTSS skills services by a mental health practitioner. We have outsourced psychiatric services to monitor the most appropriate medication interventions for all residents in placement. Our programming offers weekly vocational training and independent living skills as well as our Family Focus Program which allows us to support the families of our residents 90 days prior to the adolescent returning home.

It is my intention to ensure I stress that group residential facilities licensed by the DOC are a necessary part of the current continuum of services for adolescents in Minnesota. It is important that residents, and their families, are provided options for stepdown services or entry points into the juvenile justice system that are most appropriate. Obviously, there are changes which will occur with the establishment of the new Department of Children's Youth and Families (DCYF). It is my hope and desire that when this taskforce looks at the current system of care, they will see the need for an abundance of placement options for our youth and their families, and not take the approach of "one size fits all".

### **CONCLUSION**

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my proposals for changes in our juvenile justice system to better serve and impact our youth and families.

It is important I reiterate what my colleagues have noted on the need for funding. There is agreement that we are severely underfunded and the need to provide competitive pay for our direct care staff dealing with complex youth is crucial. We need a youth care training institute for facilities to use that will provide more unified and the most evidence-based training for our direct care staff. It is necessary to look at partnering with our higher education institutes to professionalize the profession of direct care staff with quality education at an academic level.

It is essential for our system to mandate our facilities to a standardized portion of programming focusing on supporting families. We have long focused on the needs of our clients and this needs to be continued along with the increase in family support. I feel the best option for this would be a certification in Rule 2960 licensing requirements for facilities.

Finally, I believe it is important to expand the service offerings for the youth who are participating in criminal behaviors to have secure options for placement. It is also important to recognize those of us licensed by the DOC are providing an entry point into the justice system and should be retained.

I am encouraged by the increased focus in providing community-based services to reduce the need for out-of-home placement, however, there needs to be a retention in the current service offerings for these placements which are most appropriate for our youth and their families. It is my hope DCYF will retain the system for our foster care programming to the expansion of needs for secure setting and abandon the "one size fits all" solution for juvenile justice system.

*(For reference, a copy of the most recent Rule 2960 licensing flowchart is included on the following page.)*

# Children's Residential Facilities Program Types

This chart shows the program types licensed by DHS (blue boxes) and those licensed by DOC. Each box includes the sections of Minnesota Rules, chapter 2960 that apply to each program type. The lines connecting the boxes indicate the additional requirements for the certification type.

