

OYA Director's Message

November 18, 2009

Monday I had the privilege of participating in the 11th annual Governor's Summit on Eliminating Disproportionate Minority Contact in the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems. I'd like to share with you some of my experiences and reflections about that summit.

Overall, it was a profoundly moving day. This was a gathering of people full of hope and determination, and committed to making positive change. It's one thing to talk about the importance of multiple agencies and jurisdictions working together to provide support services for youth; it's another to see those statements given life by hundreds of people who are living that vision. And those people included not only service providers but also many of the youth who have had contact with these systems. The enthusiasm and collaboration displayed throughout the day created a truly energizing experience.

Participants included representatives from state, local and tribal governments; members of many different non-profit organizations dedicated to helping youth; researchers and educators; law enforcement and court representatives; and, most importantly, the youth who have experienced the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The power of these many voices as they discussed common goals was inspirational.

Those goals are to reduce the raw numbers of all youth who must enter the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and the over-representation of minority youth in those systems. The numbers are very troubling. Hispanic youth make up just 11 percent of Oregon's youth population, yet account for 21 percent of youth in OYA custody. African American youth make up just 2 percent of Oregon's youth population, yet account for 9 percent of youth in OYA custody. And Native American, Native Hawaiian, Native Alaskan and Pacific Islander youth make up just 1.7 percent of Oregon's youth population, yet account for 4 percent of youth in OYA custody. Clearly, there is work to be done to reduce these disparities.

The issue of disproportionality does not start at the steps of the juvenile justice system, of course. We see the same disparities within child welfare, in school reading and math scores, and in high school dropout rates. Many times the agencies and organizations that are working with youth are working with the *same* youth. That's why we need to find ways to work together, leverage our strengths, and provide consistent and comprehensive services.

That message was presented not just by many excellent workshop leaders; it also was the clear message of the youth themselves. One of the most compelling events at Monday's

gathering occurred toward the end of the day when several young adults with experience in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems spoke to the conference participants.

When Taiwo Payton, one of this year's recipients of the Governor's Minority Youth Awards, was asked what advice he would give members of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, he said, "Consistency, consistency, consistency." Hanna Morris, another award recipient, said, "Listen to us. If you want us to listen to you, then you need to listen to us."

All of the youth spoke of the need to be respected, to receive attention, to be heard, and to have their cultural heritage acknowledged and supported. It was when they had received these gifts that they began to thrive. They spoke about the difficulty of moving into different living situations and treatment programs where they'd had to start over because there was no follow-through, no communications between facilities and service providers, no treatment consistency. They admonished those of us working to help youth improve their lives to do a better job of communicating not just with the youth, but with ourselves and our partners.

And they spoke about the positive difference it had made to them when their personal ethnic and racial histories were appreciated and they were allowed to connect with their cultural backgrounds. We can help reduce the cycle of disproportionality by providing our minority youth with the culturally specific and appropriate treatment and resources they need to end the cycle of criminality – not just in their own lives, but also in the lives of those they touch when they return to their communities. And by helping change the lives of minority youth we also change the lives of potential future victims who also are disproportionately members of minority groups.

These youth likely will become parents themselves one day. What they take away from their time with us will have an impact on the next generation. We must help them learn to provide the guidance their children and families will need to make wise decisions and lead productive lives in the coming years.

These youth are at an early stage in their life journeys, and we play a role in those journeys. When youth who have been a part of OYA think back on this part of their life, what role in their history do we want to have played?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Colette S. Peters". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Colette S. Peters
Director