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OYA researchers explain initiatives to League of Women Voters

Dr. Margaret Braun (left) and Dr. Shannon Myrick

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About 50 community members turned out for a presentation by OYA researchers at the March 10 League of Women Voters of Portland meeting. The discussion on the unseasonably warm night centered around one issue: What is government doing to help youth as they enter the juvenile justice system?

Deena Corso, Multnomah County's community justice manager, kicked off the meeting with an explanation of the Crossover Youth practice model. Crossover Youth are assigned both a juvenile parole and probation officer and a state Department of Human Services caseworker to collaboratively support youth and their families. This model keeps youth in their homes and reduces disproportionate minority contact in the juvenile system.

Corso concluded by reporting that all Multnomah County Juvenile Services Division staff have taken 12 hours of trauma informed care training.

OYA researcher Dr. Margaret Braun spoke of the agency's hope for at-risk youth. "We want the youth that OYA serves to be our good neighbors and good participants of society when they're released from our care and custody," she said of the developmental approach to juvenile justice taken by the agency.

Braun, who heads up the OYA feeder system study, illustrated how costly it can be to send youth through the state system before his or her need for services is noticed. The cost per patient at the Oregon State Hospital is $700 per day, OYA averages about $200, and the state prison system costs around $80 per inmate per day.

One example that resonated with the audience was that of an Oregon man who had been arrested 99 times before finally being admitted to the state hospital. Braun said this represented 99 opportunities for the state to have taken notice of his need for services and support before committing serious crimes.

Never before has this information sharing across agencies allowed OYA to combine more than a decade of individual-level enrollment records from state social services and education. As OYA Strategic Initiatives Manager Dr. Shannon Myrick pointed out, Oregon is fortunate to have a data-rich juvenile justice system. "There also is an unmatched amount of sharing resources and information between counties," she said.

The results of the feeder system study indicated that up to 90 percent of youth may be involved with state programs prior to arriving at OYA, confirming that opportunities for early intervention exist within Oregon's social service system. Many OYA-involved youth are identified as higher risk at an earlier stage by social workers, school teachers, local police, juvenile departments, and others.

As the Youth Reformation System team is about to embark on its statewide Positive Human Development (PHD) training in April, Myrick explained the culture change initiative. After mentioning Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which the PHD pyramid is loosely based upon, Myrick led the audience through the levels of the PHD pyramid.

“OYA’s youth population is composed mostly of teens, and teen brains aren’t fully developed yet,” said Myrick. “In fact, the human brain doesn’t fully form until the mid-20s and teens simply cannot process information in a healthy way 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 impact almost 100 percent of our youth.”

Conversely, Myrick pointed out, “Environments with low stress, freedom to make reasonable choices, and opportunities for engagement and caring and supportive relationships, give the brain healthy development. With our youth, research points to steering healthy, developing brains toward productive, crime free lives. This is the essence of PHD.”