Creating the TYC Rehabilitation Program

A key piece of the 2007 effort to reform the Texas Youth Commission (Senate Bill 103, 80th Texas Legislature) calls for the creation of a sound treatment system capable of providing individual youth the help and tools they need to leave behind their delinquent ways in order to become productive adults. Specifically, the reform requirements call for the new TYC treatment program to be:

- **Youth-centered** – instead of making youth fit the treatment program, the agency tailors the program to fit the unique needs of each individual youth. The underlying, motivating question is: “What is best for the youth?”

- **Evidence-based** – Programs from across the country that are “evidence-based,” (statistically proven to reduce recidivism) were reviewed for effectiveness.

- **Flexible** – Rather than each youth having to meet the same criteria for completion as in previous TYC treatment programs, youth are assigned different goals based upon their abilities and needs, which are determined at intake and then regularly reassessed to measure progress or the need for changes, so that goals can be adjusted accordingly.

- **Accountable for program effectiveness** – TYC efforts are documented through ongoing performance measures adapted to the goals and strategies of the program.

Implemented by appropriate staff – Properly licensed staff are responsible for clinical oversight and providing program training. Additionally, the program meets the skill sets of the agency’s clinical staff and other direct care workers. Staff members are appropriately trained, coached and mentored in the knowledge, skills and abilities to carry out their job duties. Staff members are not engaged in provision of advanced clinical services beyond their knowledge, skills and abilities.

Integration with other TYC and community programming --CoNEXTions® is an integrated approach to rehabilitation. It is all inclusive, incorporating, for example, education, vocational training, daily behavior, individual youth interests and goals with the youth’s basic mental health and psychological treatment needs and specialized treatment needs. The program and course of treatment for any TYC youth begins “with the end in mind.” The focus of the TYC treatment approach is the youth’s successful reintegation to their home and community.

What is CoNEXTions®?

CoNEXTions® is an integrated, system-wide rehabilitative program offering various therapeutic techniques and tools that are used to help individual TYC youth. The name, CoNEXTions®, stems from the basic goal of the program -- to prepare youth to take the NEXT step, to connect youth to healthy, law-abiding relationships with their peers, families, and communities. The name symbolizes the hope that once youth are properly connected with other people, they are in a better position to connect to their futures, or the NEXT phase of their lives, with an optimistic and realistic outlook.

The CoNEXTions® Approach

CoNEXTions® focuses on two questions:

1. What causes youth to come into the juvenile justice system? (risk factors)
2. What keeps youth from returning to the system? (protective factors)

CoNEXTions® uses an evidence-based, automated assessment, the Positive Achievement Change Tool (PACT), to assess individual youth risk factors and protective factors. The PACT provides the foundation for designing individual treatment plans targeting skill building to reduce a youth’s risk factors and increase protective factors. The basic assumption of CoNEXTions® is that intense and system-wide implementation of thinking skills training and interventions specific to risk and protective factors will decrease recidivism and crime among youth in the program.

Risk and protective areas that are addressed include:

- Attitudes, values, and beliefs
- Influences and associations with people
- Effects of abuse of alcohol/drugs
- Personality traits
- Ability to control behavior
- Current family dynamics and supportive relationships within the family
- Academic/vocational achievement
- Use of leisure time

The Traditional Approach

- Establish control over offenders
- Fix youth problems with professional services
- Increase sanctions for anti-social behavior

The TYC Approach

Connect youth with positive social forces and assets

Draw on community resources to engage youth

Engage youth in pro-social activities and opportunities

TYC operates secure facilities and halfway houses; utilizes contract care programs; and supervises youth on parole. The Goldings State School is pictured above.
CoNEXtions® Step-By-Step

Assessment & Orientation

Upon admission to the TYC assessment units, youth are assessed in multiple areas: mental health; education; vocation; and medical needs, and are evaluated for specialized treatment needs. Risk and protective factors are identified and an initial case plan is developed to begin targeting these factors. Youth are classified according to their committing offense and needs, designated a minimum length of stay, and are assigned to a placement dependent upon their rehabilitation needs, proximity to home, and risk level. During the assessment and orientation process, youth are introduced to a skills program – Thinking for a Change (T4C). Planning for transition/reintroduction into the community begins during assessment and the plan is revised as the youth progresses while in TYC.

General Rehabilitation Program

CoNEXtions® is an integration of programs within TYC, including education and workforce development, and provides a comprehensive case plan of rehabilitation for each youth and addresses their specific needs. The Thinking for a Change (T4C) curriculum is woven into daily interactions between youth and staff members, with “thinking reports” used to process problems when they arise. Four times each week, youth attend structured skills groups that target risk factors and help youth develop or improve the skills they need to live successfully in their communities. One day each week, youth participate in a skills application group. In this group, youth have an opportunity to discuss and practice new skills, thereby increasing protective factors in these areas. These skills include: communicating effectively with others, managing emotions, evaluating their alcohol and drug use decisions, problem solving, family living skills, and making wise choices/decisions.

Required Supplemental Groups

In addition to attending skills groups, youth may be required to attend other types of groups which assist them in areas of special needs. Required supplemental groups are conducted up to four times per week and target specific risk factors, focusing on areas such as anger management, alcohol and other drug education, mental health support, and psycho-sexual development.

Specialized Treatment Programs

Specialized treatment is provided for youth identified as having a significant need in a specific area. The specialized treatment programs are: Capital and Serious Violent Offender Treatment Program, Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Program, Mental Health Treatment Program, and Sexual Behavior Treatment Program. In these programs, youth receive treatment services from specially trained or licensed staff and participate in programming that is designed around their specific needs in that target area. Youth in specialized treatment programs receive ongoing support and staff receive specialized training to maintain the advanced skills and knowledge needed to work with special-needs populations.

Leisure Skills Building Groups

Leisure Skills Building Groups are held on weekends and evenings and are offered by staff, volunteers or professionals with an interest and training in the chosen topic: money management, guitar lessons, painting, sculpting, etc. These groups provide the youth additional opportunities that are not solely focused on rehabilitation, but target the building of pro-social leisure skills.

Family Involvement

Family involvement and interaction is encouraged and supported. Each facility has unique strategies for increasing family involvement, including educational workshops, open house meetings, family day activities, multi-disciplinary team meetings, and facility orientations. Families are encouraged to be actively involved in developing their youth’s community re-integration plan. At all facilities, visits and letters are encouraged and welcomed. Multi-family conferences are held quarterly to assist parents and guardians to understand and support youth in the TYC facilities. In addition to the case plan, the family is provided a written overview of the youth’s progress every 90 days.

Education, Vocational Training & Workforce Development

The educational needs of each youth are individualized and supportive of the youth’s goals. Youth are provided the opportunity to improve basic academic skills, particularly reading and math, and to work toward earning their high school diploma and/or a GED. Workforce Development programs offer employment preparation and reintegation services in both facilities and aftercare. Vocational programs are aligned with industry standards and certifications where possible. Teachers, with the assistance of juvenile correctional officers, use classroom management skills that provide an environment favorable to learning for all youth.

Multi-Disciplinary Team and Case Planning

Youth are evaluated monthly by a multidisciplinary team, which consists of their case manager, an assigned educator, and juvenile correctional officers, who work with the youth on a regular basis. Medical input is provided to ensure any medical issues are properly addressed in daily living and in case planning. Parents are also invited to participate in the monthly multi-disciplinary team meeting. The multi-disciplinary team formally reassesses a youth’s progress each month, changing case plan objectives as needed to meet the individual youth’s needs, targeting specific skills to develop, and assessing their overall “stage” in CoNEXtions®.

Evaluating progress – Stages of CoNEXtions®

Progression through CoNEXtions® is measured through five stages, beginning with Stage 1 and ending with Youth Empowerment Status (YES). The youth’s stage assignment reflects the stage objectives on which the youth is currently working. Once those objectives are completed, the youth is promoted to the next stage. Each stage has objectives for the youth to complete that will assist with the following outcomes:

- increase understanding of personal risk and protective factors and how those relate to success/lack of success in the community;
- movement toward developing a concrete community reintegration plan; and
- engagement of the youth’s family in programming; and
- understanding how the youth’s committing offense was related to risk factors, including their underlying attitudes, values and beliefs.

The youth’s consistent and active participation in all areas of programming – development and completion of case plan objectives, groups, specialized treatment programs (if applicable), academic and workforce development programs, and consistent application of learned skills in daily behavior is also required for stage promotion.

Positive Behavior Change System

The Positive Behavior Change System (PBCS) is designed to bring out the best in youth, offering them strong incentives to behave in ways that contribute to a safe, therapeutic culture. At the same time, youth learn skills which help them solve problems and manage emotions that can lead to negative behaviors. All staff and youth are expected to follow five basic rules:

1. (1) Be in the right place at the right time;
2. (2) Follow directions;
3. (3) Participate in activities;
4. (4) Respect others; and
5. (5) Accept consequences.

Youth are provided a daily rating of their performance in following the five basic rules. Aside from privileges awarded to youth based on their progress in the stages of CoNEXtions®, youth may receive additional privileges based upon their daily and weekly performance ratings. These ratings also contribute to evaluating the youth’s stage progression.

Many, if not most, youth who are committed to TYC are behind in their academic studies. The median math and reading performance for TYC youth is at a 5th grade level – five years behind their peers.