

JUVENILE COURT FAMILY ADVOCATES OFFER CULTURALLY-COMPETENT SERVICES

Disproportionate minority contact (DMC), or the overrepresentation of youth of color in the juvenile justice system, has been documented in many jurisdictions. Specific populations affected by DMC vary across the nation, but the data clearly show that Hispanics, African-Americans, and Native Americans are often overrepresented in the justice system compared to Whites. Stakeholders in San Diego County were concerned about possible DMC in the local juvenile justice system, which led to substantial research to identify whether it existed and if so, the reasons contributing to it. In 2008, SANDAG released its report, *San Diego County's Juvenile Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC): Identification and Assessment*, which found that Hispanics and African-Americans were overrepresented in the local juvenile justice system. In addition to race, the report identified other factors (e.g., substance abuse, gang involvement) that placed youth of color at greater risk of becoming more deeply involved in the system (e.g., being removed from their home).

Using the data from these analyses, this 2008 report included recommendations for policy and program strategies to reduce DMC and recidivism while fostering successful completion of court requirements (e.g., reducing failures to appear in court). One recommendation focused specifically on Hispanic youth and alleviating any cultural and language barriers encountered while negotiating a complex legal system. This goal was addressed in a tangible manner by the San Diego County Probation Department and Juvenile Court, which partnered to provide bilingual/bicultural Family Advocates at Juvenile Court in May 2010. These advocates, who are retired Probation Officers, disseminate information in English and Spanish to help better prepare parents and youth to address court and Probation requirements, and they have helped over 4,500 visitors between May 2010 and October 2012, reflecting the demand for their services.

*"Thank you for having someone that speaks our language."
Family Advocate Respondent, 2012*

Information from over 400 satisfaction surveys, completed by individuals served by the Family Advocates from February to October 2012, showed a high level of satisfaction with the Family Advocates and the guidance they provided to foster a better understanding of court expectations (Table 1). Reflecting the need for bilingual/bicultural advocates, almost two-thirds of respondents reported being Hispanic/Latino (65%) and nearly half (42%) said Spanish was the primary language in the home. Court personnel were the main referral sources to the booth (86%), underscoring the value the court places on the Family Advocate services (not shown).

Table 1	
NEARLY ALL RESPONDENTS FOUND THE FAMILY ADVOCATES BENEFICIAL AND INFORMATIVE	
93%	were "very satisfied" with the Family Advocates
92%	had a better understanding of the juvenile court process and what was expected of them
83%	thought the Family Advocates were "extremely helpful"
TOTAL	444

Source: Probation Family Advocate Survey, 2012

While the staffing of the Family Advocates was initially made possible through a Title II-DMC grant that ended in 2012, their presence will continue with funding support from Probation, demonstrating a commitment to alleviating DMC in the juvenile justice system by providing culturally-competent services. To access SANDAG's 2008 DMC report, go to www.sandag.org/cj.