

NEWS NEWS



Department of Human Services

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**Anne Marie Ambrose
Commissioner**

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Philadelphia recognized for efforts to address overrepresentation of minorities in the juvenile justice system

Philadelphia, PA--The Philadelphia Department of Human Services' (DHS) Youth Study Center (YSC) was awarded the first *County Juvenile Detention Center Best Practices for the 21st Century Award* for its Philadelphia Disproportionate Minority Contact Forum Program, which aims to address the problem of overrepresentation of minorities in the juvenile justice system.

According to DHS Commissioner Anne Marie Ambrose, although minority youth account for only 22 percent of the population, they make up 76 percent of youth in correctional facilities in Pennsylvania. "The Disproportionate Minority Forum Program is an example of an innovative and collaborative effort to address a critical problem," said Ambrose. "The program is successfully implementing strategies to reduce conflict between young people of color and law enforcement while keeping our communities safer. It is an extreme honor to be recognized for this important work."

The Philadelphia Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) Forum Program was developed by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency's Philadelphia Working Group, which is comprised of numerous juvenile justice stakeholders who share a commitment to eliminating racial disparities including: the Philadelphia Department of Human Services Division of Juvenile Justice Services, the Defender Association of Philadelphia, the

Philadelphia District Attorney's Office, the School District of Philadelphia, Juvenile Probation, and faith based and community organizations.

With the support of the state DMC subcommittee, Philadelphia became the first of five counties in Pennsylvania to sponsor minority youth law enforcement forums, which bring law enforcement officers and minority youth together to talk frankly and openly about problems on the street and the troubled relationships between youth and law enforcement. The forums take place within Philadelphia's public schools and within the YSC and provide an opportunity for youth and law enforcement to be heard and to consider each other's views about how to improve relations between the two groups.

“By opening a dialogue between youth and law enforcement, the forums aim we hope to reduce the number of volatile interactions between youth and officers on the street, to decrease arrests of minority youth and to diminish the chance of injuries to officers and youth on the street,” said Philadelphia Police Commissioner, Charles Ramsey.

In 2007, with the support of the MacArthur Foundation DMC Network, the Philadelphia Workgroup collaborated with minority youth, the Philadelphia Police Department, the Office of the District Attorney, and many other stakeholders to create a curriculum, which is now used in a one-day training for police academy cadets, all of whom will have arrest powers upon their graduation. The training not only includes opportunities for cadets and minority youth to interface directly with one another in a non-threatening environment, but serves to instruct cadets on youth culture, adolescent brain development, concepts of hypervigilance and hypermasculinity, as well as distinctive characteristics of coping strategies for boys and girls. Cadets discuss the environmental, physical and biological reasons why teenagers think and behave the way they do and how adolescent responses to authority differs from adult responses.

In a separate session, youth are taught to identify how environmental influences, peer pressure, and issues of respect impact their behavior with law enforcement and they discuss options that can contribute to safe and positive interactions with police. By training officers to recognize the difference between potentially criminal conduct and normal adolescent behavior and by working with youth to emphasize responsible decision making and appropriate respect and response to law enforcement authorities, the Philadelphia Working Group is making a difference in the quality of life for both youth and law enforcement and making Philadelphia a safer and more livable city for all its citizens.

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The Philadelphia Department of Human Services is the City agency charged with protecting children from abuse, neglect, and delinquency; ensuring their safety and permanency in nurturing home environments; and strengthening and preserving families by enhancing

community-based prevention services. In partnership with community organizations, DHS provides services to strengthen the overall well being of Philadelphia children, youth, and families using a customer focused approach that is responsive to evolving community needs.