

Every child is unique. One child may be able to respond to a disruption or adversity in his or her life by shouldering the challenge; another might be impacted so deeply that he or she develops severe behavioral issues. When a child also has a serious emotional disturbance, the combination may lead to a complete inability to cope, manifested in extreme behavior difficulties.

DHS MAKING AN IMPACT

RESPOND

It was for these thankfully rare situations - requiring an extraordinary level of multi-disciplinary planning and assistance and creative blending of funding - that the Residential Enhancement Service Planning Opportunities for New Directions (RESPOND) program was created. It assists the child so he or she can learn to function in the community. It has benefitted 40 young people since its beginning 12 years ago, like Tyler, a shining example of how, in mustering the staffing and financial resources up front to stabilize and restore well-being, RESPOND pays off in the long term.



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Marc Cherna
Director, Allegheny County
Department of Human Services

Tyler *Some of the names in this story have been changed to protect privacy.*

By the time Tyler turned 13, he had been in inpatient behavioral programs more than half a dozen times. He was so aggressive toward people and property that social service and medical professionals decided Tyler needed a Department of Human Services (DHS) program with a long name but an even longer reach.

Called Residential Enhancement Service Planning Opportunities for New Directions (RESPOND), the program wraps children who have intellectual or developmental disabilities and/or mental illness,

and severe behavioral issues, in intensive, 24/7 support.

The program has three residential providers, each of whom hosts no more than two children at a time and who are supported by mobile treatment teams. The number is limited because of the scope and complexity of the problems that highly trained staff must address.

Tyler’s situation fit the scope of the RESPOND program. His behavior had become so problematic that therapists decided he could benefit from RESPOND’s 3:1 staff/child ratio.



Rich Fitzgerald
Allegheny County Executive

Three highly trained specialists with experience in complex needs accompanied him wherever he went: home, school, community. The RESPOND staff also addressed his dental and medical needs, which had been neglected. By the time Tyler finished his stay at a RESPOND home, his staff had been reduced to one and his need for medication was substantially less. He had a graduation ceremony and at age 15, moved to care with a resource family and life in the community. And those who know him were praising his turnaround, saying Tyler's hard work, the interventions of the RESPOND program and support of an integrated team made the difference.

"He's building friendships. He has real relationships. He matured and learned appropriate coping skills," said Kristen DeComo Jacobs, Multisystem Specialist in the Department of Human Service's Executive Office, which provides oversight to the RESPOND program. "A lot of his successes were built on trust." "Staff worked with him day in and day out," said Steve, program supervisor for the RESPOND residential provider, who supervised Tyler's RESPOND home. "I really take my hat off to them. They showed Tyler they could be trusted. I don't think he was used to that."

DHS designed RESPOND in partnership with UPMC Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic (WPIC) and three residential providers: Family Links, Inc., Penn Residential Inc., and Passavant Memorial Homes. The program also utilizes a WPIC Mobile Treatment Team (MTT), consisting of a program director/lead child psychologist; medical director/board certified child psychiatrist; psychiatric nurse, behavior specialist, community-based clinician and social worker.

As needed, consultants were added to the team – dieticians, gastroenterologists, internists – to make sure all of Tyler's physical and behavioral needs were met. Tyler's life lacked crucial psychological underpinnings and guidance. His mother gave birth to him at age 15 and had her own issues, including anger management and drug problems. His father had been incarcerated and even after leaving jail, did not establish ties with Tyler. Prior to RESPOND, Tyler spent over 4 years in residential treatment facilities.

"Tyler missed years when he should've been developing social skills," Kristen said. "He couldn't engage. He couldn't make eye contact with anyone." Steve added that Tyler was naturally shy and, being unable to label or work out his emotions, he turned to lashing out when he could not process his feelings. "With the guidance of the home and Mobile Treatment Team showing empathy, problem-solving and listening, as opposed to always telling Tyler what to do, he began to turn around," Steve said. "It did take a long time. This was not an easy case."

Children such as Tyler are referred to RESPOND by the DHS Multisystem Rapid Response Team (RRT). The team brings together representatives from the DHS Offices of Behavioral Health (OBH), Intellectual Disability (OID), Children, Youth and Families (CYF), the Executive's office, managed care organization, courts and more to recommend solutions for children for whom most other systems have failed. In Tyler's case, relatives had declined to take him in and so did approved private schools. He had become cunning at avoiding treatment at residential facilities. He destroyed property. He refused to go to school.

His interactions with other people were abusive and sometimes violent. No one knew what to do with him. Only constant medication would calm him down. "I watched as individual, capable staff members were helpless to change the outcome because of the structure of treatment," said Alana, the Pittsburgh lawyer who served as Tyler's educational and medical guardian. "Since the day Tyler arrived at the RESPOND home, he could not avoid treatment, having no one else to blame for whatever was happening around him. He was finally compelled by staff, who were focused on Tyler alone, to take responsibility for his actions, to process with staff what had been done, why he had done it and how it could be resolved differently."

Kristen credited Tyler's integrated team, a key component of RESPOND, with the dedicated support Tyler needed. The team consisted of 14 members, including RESPOND staff, teachers, administrative guardian, school representatives, service coordinator, caseworkers and more. Allegheny County Judge Kathleen Hens-Greco was also on the team and even attended his graduation from RESPOND.

"His team was committed to attending all meetings. I can't help but look at that and think everyone had a common goal and concern about his future. It was amazing to see how many people were dedicated to his progress," Kristen said. "RESPOND has, without any doubt, changed Tyler's life for the better," Alana said in a letter to DHS Director Marc Cherna. "Tyler was one of the biggest turnarounds I've ever experienced," said Steve. "Here at RESPOND you're able to home in on a client's needs. They're not getting lost among the other kids. You are able to stay focused."