STEPS: Workers addressing anger issues in new ways

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He ended up in a quiet room with a counselor who probed what triggered the scene.

This is STEPS, which stands for "stop, think, explore, plan, share," and it's the state's effort to move away from isolation as the answer to juvenile trouble.

Zack said he's spent plenty of time in isolation and STEPS. In isolation, he stews. But he likes STEPS, he said, and goes a few times each week to cool down.

Only a few months old, STEPS is now used following verbal outbursts, or when a youth just needs a break. It allows them to calm down while not disrupting others. Before, they used to land incarcerated youth in a locked room, but now that punishment is reserved for more violent episodes.

Zack's conduct was in the middle of the trouble scale. In a monotone, measured voice, he told STEPS worker Rolando Contreras what happened. He remained deadpan as he described the rage he was feeling. Zack said he doesn't show his anger until it's uncontrollable. When he asked for a break after a dispute with another kid the staff member told him he seemed fine.

He responded by throwing a shoe and kicking things.

"In the calm way, I was showing her I was mad. She didn't believe me," Zack said. "So I felt like I had to show her in a different way."

The event was emblematic of Zack's struggle with MacLaren, and the facility's effort to better deal with incarcerated youth who often have lives rife with trauma. Zack had been held at Marion County Juvenile Detention since he was 12. Over the years, the staff learned what set him off and what calmed him down.

He transferred to MacLaren a month ago as he neared his 18th birthday. So far, he and the MacLaren staff are still doing an awkward, introductory dance.

The Oregon Youth Authority's move away from isolation in favor of things like STEPS initially created a rub with some staff.

"There are systems that rely on isolation and rely on pepper spray," Director Joe O'Leary said. "They are control devices. The belief is if you don't have access to those, you're making the environment less safe."

O'Leary said as isolation use has declined, so have violent incidents. In 2017, the Legislature passed a bill endorsed by O'Leary that bans the use of isolation for punishment. Instead, the agency uses it to manage a youth in crisis and provide them an "opportunity to self-regulate behavior" according to state code. MacLaren workers still use it in the face of violence.

When a youth is in isolation, they must be monitored every 15 minutes, and taken out when they are no longer a danger to themselves or others. Youth can't be in isolation more than five days.

Over the past few years, isolation at Oregon Youth Authority facilities has declined, going from 370 instances in July 2016 to 140 in December 2018.

A diverse group

MacLaren is the behemoth of Oregon's juvenile justice system. It sits in northeast Woodburn, about 19 miles north of Salem on Highway 99 on a 172-acre parcel, 80 of which are enclosed in high fencing. With 271 beds, it's Oregon Youth Authority's largest institution, and generally operates at capacity.

It's also infamous. During a recent visit, staff joked about how their parents used the facility as a threat.

"You'd better be good, or you'll get sent to MacLaren," they were told.

MacLaren holds some of Oregon's most dangerous youth. Many were convicted under Measure 11, Oregon's minimum sentencing law, and will eventually move to prison. It held Kip Kinkel, the Thurston High School shooter, for nearly 10 years until he was transferred in 2007.

It also currently houses 40 youth working on their bachelor's degree. It holds young men becoming experts in metal work and machining, learning about their culture and fighting to change the juvenile justice laws keeping them locked up.

Four years ago, the department implemented a "positive human development" program aimed to rehabilitate youth. Part of that is treating the youth better: Staff are supposed to act more like councilors or social workers than correctional officers.

At Oak Creek Correctional Facility, the smaller female facility in Albany, that culture shift is visible. Youth are quick to talk about the good relationships they've built with employees, and how they are scared to leave such a supportive environment. But agency officials said transforming the culture in MacLaren is different.

Culture shift

"I think the bigger the facility, and the longer it's been around, the harder it is," said Clint McClellan, assistant director of facility services.

Sometimes workers feel the new approach puts them in danger.

"Where they live and breathe is around safety," McClellan said of staff. "That's their lifeblood."

McClellan said some of the "old school" staff saw the shift as letting kids do whatever they wanted with no repercussions. About five years ago, agency executives conducted meetings with staff about reducing time in isolation. Heber Bray, a youth authority policy analyst, said the push of taking away such a classic tool was long and trying.

"You can watch any corrections movie anywhere in the world," he said. "That's the punishment — you go to the hole."

In a juvenile setting, getting sent to isolation can include time in a restricted cell, working with staff on the unit, or other activities.

"As episodes reduce, the length of stay in isolation goes up, because you are only using it for serious episodes," Bray said. In December, stays on the isolation unit at all facilities ranged from 25 minutes to four days.

Line workers made it clear that one disruptive kid can trigger disarray in a 25-person unit. There needed to be somewhere to send them. They landed on creating an "in between" space, like STEPS, where a kid could go to cool down and have therapy without being in isolation. But agency heads knew if STEPS was considered punishment, like isolation, it wouldn't have the desired effect.

When considered punishment, "It becomes another hammer," Bray said.

At the end of summer, STEPS was born. The program is housed in an old kitchen and dining hall previously used for youth living. Only MacLaren uses STEPS, but Bray said it will be rolled to the four other juvenile corrections locations in the spring.

An alternative

In a large agency, a mentality fostered over decades can be hard to shed. Back in the STEPS building, Zack told Ronaldo Contreras about another staffer that he struggles to get along with. Contreras, fellow STEPS worker Chaan Saechao and a youth helper all discussed the staffer as well. The consensus: He's old school.

Zack said the staffer talks to him in a commanding way, threatening to punish him if he doesn't obey. He likened it to being treated like an animal.

What Zack described was opposite of what the agency is working to implement, and which is so clearly on display at Oak Creek. But Contreras' response perfectly aligned with the new mission.

Contreras asked Zack to role play the staffers he was mad at. He then would imitate their voices and actions, even in a mocking tone. It diffused a tense situation. Zack eased up. He listened to observations and laughed. He was vulnerable, talking about the issues he deals with daily.

And Contreras used the opportunity to explain that the workers mean well, and have a lot to deal with.

But Contreras conceded that some employees are struggling under the new culture guidelines, even if they've been in place for years. Contreras then explained that he would report the incident, including how Zack viewed it, so other employees could learn.

Life on the unit

STEPS addresses a critical demographic at MacLaren, mostly younger and traumatized, Bray said.

"The kids that use STEPS the most are emotionally reactive kids — the kids that maybe shouldn't have been brought into the incarceration system to begin with," Bray said.

Ezequiel, 23, is seven years into a 20-year sentence. Today, he's a model inmate. He's about to graduate from Portland State University on the dean's list. He has stopped getting in fights and has become spiritual. The large gang tattoo across his chest is fading following on-site tattoo removal sessions, analogous of the former life he started to shed a couple years into his time at MacLaren.

Ezequiel is an ambassador of reform, and was picked to guide a reporter's tour of MacLaren. He and others with long sentences are active in Hope Partnership, a program that brings in experts to show their craft, whether it be podcasting, gardening or film.

Through these programs, Ezequiel got in touch with his Aztec roots. He learned cultural dances, and started using a sweat lodge on the grounds. There, he said, a couple years into his stay at MacLaren, things clicked for him and he learned to be humble, he said.

"I was introduced to that here," Ezequiel said. "I wasn't introduced to that out in the community."

Oregon Capital Bureau/Aubrey Wieber

Ezequiel shows the Native American sweat lodge built on the MacLaren property. Using the lodge and learning things like historic Aztec dances have helped him relate with his culture as he sheds his past running with gangs.

Courtesy of Oregon Youth Authority

Left: John, a youth mentor at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility, helps 18-year-old Zack understand the various personalities of staff at the facility. John regularly works in the STEPS program, an alternative to isolation, which Zack uses several times each week. Right: The isolation unit at the MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility in Woodburn.

Walden: To hold first town halls since 2017

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halls that drew thousands of callers and his meetings with smaller forums and focus groups.

The release announcing January's meetings stated that the congressman has held 148 town hall meetings since 2012.

Walden began his term on Thursday, the second day of the Legislative session, by breaking ranks with the Republican Party and backing a Democratic bill that would end the government shutdown. He voted against another Democratic bill which would fund the Department of Homeland Security, but would not provide money for a border wall.

Both bills passed in the House, but Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has said he will not bring the bills to the Senate because President Donald Trump won't sign them.

Walden said in an interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting that he didn't think employees of national parks and forests should be caught up in a fight about border security.

Walden will be at the Pendleton Convention Center on Wednesday, Jan. 23 at 8:30 a.m., and at the SAGE Center Theater in Boardman the same day, at noon.

Effort: Underway to strengthen hate-crime laws

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and immigrants, people of color and others together. Among those attending Monday's session were the police chief of Salem and a sheriff, Hussaini said.

"To be on a task force with law enforcement officials, to maintain our identity, to correct the record and speak frankly and clearly to these powers, gives us keen insights and allows us to have an exchange with law enforcement that is usually absent," Hussaini said.

The turnout showed there's "overwhelming support" for the effort to strengthen the state's hate-crime laws, Hussaini said.

Currently, the crime of intimidation in the first degree, a felony, applies only if two or more people harm another person because of "that person's race, color, religion, sexual orientation, disability or national origin," or if they cause another person to fear imminent serious injury.

But if a person motivated by prejudice acts alone, it's only intimidation in the second degree — a misdemeanor. It's also a misdemeanor if a person tampers with property or makes threats because of prejudice.

A glaring example, Hussaini said, is the case of Jeremy Christian, who allegedly stabbed three people — killing two of them — aboard a light-rail train in Portland in May 2017. The victims had tried to intervene as Christian spewed anti-Muslim threats at two black teenage girls.

Yet it was not classified as a hate crime, Hussaini noted. Christian's trial on charges including aggravated murder is pending.

The task force is seeking to help craft legislation that would go before lawmakers during the 2019 session. It would also address data collection.

The other listening sessions were scheduled for Tuesday in Eugene and Wednesday in Medford.

Program: Response to community survey overwhelming, confirmed need in Pendleton

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That need was confirmed when the department-commissioned survey showed that 54 percent of respondents considered an after-school program for elementary school students "very important." Combined with the respondents who labeled an after-school program "somewhat important," 86 percent of survey takers voiced their desire for the program.

Hughes started meeting with leaders from the Pendleton School District and the IMESD. Under the current plan, the parks and recreation department would provide staffing for the program while the Pendleton School District would provide the facilities at Washington Elementary School, Sherwood Heights Elementary School, McKay Creek Elementary School, and the Pendleton Early Learning Center.

Pendleton Superintendent Chris Fritsch said the program would likely reside in the schools' cafeterias or gyms.

IMESD Superintendent Mark Mulvihill said the service district has assigned its director of instructional service, Eric Volger, to craft a curriculum. The program's sponsors envision after-school sessions, including a structured physical activity, snacks, and a rotating schedule of STEM, art and music activities.

Mulvihill said the idea is to avoid hours of free play while making sure that students don't view it as another source of schoolwork.

"We want to make it a fun, interactive experience," he said.

The three agencies still have other details to sort out. Although the survey asked respondents if they would support an after-school program from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., Hughes said the exact hours have yet to be determined. And although the parks and recreation department is committed to hiring new "boots on the ground" to staff each site, Hughes said the exact staffing level will also need to be determined.

Hughes said the program has flexibility in its staffing levels because it's operated by public entities, but he would want it at similar staff-to-child ratios as child care centers.

The city expects about 100 students in the program's first year.

"We want to be a quality program," he said. "We don't want to be a warehouse that houses kids."

The city plans to charge parents $8 per day to offset staffing costs, but Hughes admitted that low-income families may have trouble paying for tuition.

If a student attended all 170 school days when the after-school program was offered, it would cost a parent $1,360 per year.

About 55 percent of the Pendleton School District's students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and Hughes expects a similar amount will need financial assistance to pay for tuition.

An after-school scholarship fund recently received a $5,000 grant from Cycle Oregon, the guided bicycle ride nonprofit that came through Pendleton in September. But Hughes wants to bolster the fund further with the Wild West Beer Fest, a June 22 craft beer festival fundraiser.

The IMESD is also providing grant writing services to find additional revenue to support the program.