

Transforming Lives



The HARRIS CENTER for  
Mental Health and IDD



**Serving the Family, Not Serving  
Time:**

**Family Intervention Restorative  
Services of Texas (FIRST)**

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# Objectives

- Insight into the systemic and fiscal advantages of the collaboration between behavioral health providers, law enforcement, and the juvenile justice to provide a therapeutic response to the behavioral health and IDD needs of juveniles and their families rather than incarceration.
- Knowledge to replicate the FIRST program, eligibility criteria, and service arrays, and the lifetime advantages for the youth, families, and the community.
- Identify potential barriers of interagency collaboration between behavioral health providers and juvenile justice system as well as solutions for overcoming these barriers.

# The Origin Story of FIRST

In 2018, Harris County District Attorney asked John Jordan to

- Reduce the Footprint



- Expand Diversions





# Working Together

- The F.I.R.S.T. program is a youth diversion program built upon collaboration between



- FIRST is a family intervention program that targets offenses involving disputes within the family.
- The youth and family are required to attend services.
- The program lasts 6 months.

# Legal Process of a FIRST Diversion



- Before making an arrest in Harris County, the police must call the District Attorney's Office, and an ADA accepts or declines charges.
- When an ADA accepts charges, the ADA is actually only authorizing processing (arrest)—versus making a determination whether charges will be filed in court
- After arrest, the Juvenile Division Chief, Court Chief, or the Diversion ADA screen the case.
- Texas Family Code §53.012, authorizes the ADA to do the following:
  - **Juvenile ADA can reject the charge;**
  - **Juvenile ADA can put the youth in a Diversion Program;**  
**or**
  - **Juvenile ADA can file a Petition in Court.**





# Systemic Advantages of FIRST

- Keep juveniles out of the juvenile justice system
- Cost-effective
- Youth and Family have access to the services they need
- The approach addresses problems within the family unit.
- No court delay or stigma
- Case dismissed. Expungement of arrest offered.

# Law Enforcement Buy-in



**Diversion is Public Safety**



# Start-up and Funding

- FIRST began with no new funding.
- The program was built through collaboration in 2019.
- An existing Mobile Crisis Outreach Team (MCOT) accepted referrals and completed assessments.
- FIRST received the Texas System of Care grant for 2 years.
- System of Care grant funded 1 Youth Peer.





## Eligibility

- Youth 10-16 years old
- Voluntary
- Harris County Residents only
- Charged with a misdemeanor offense of:
  - Family Violence
  - Terroristic Threat
  - Deadly Conduct
  - Criminal Mischief

## Service Array

- Within 48 hours, clinical assessment to determine needs.
- Referrals for SUD treatment, anger management, or education services (credit recovery).
- The Harris Center or another entity provides mental health services.
- Person-centered
- Individual and family therapy and medication management
- Continuation of crisis services, if needed
- Facilitation into YES Waiver
- Case management or youth peer support

# Youth Peer Specialists

- Youth peers use their lived experiences to collaborate with, coach, and challenge youth to view their life experiences as an opportunity for growth, change, and recovery.
- Provide advocacy, support, and encouragement.
- Advocate for youth by bringing their voice into the planning and recovery process even if the youth has a different perspective than their caregivers.
- Creatively collaborate with treatment team including parents, peers, case managers, natural supports, and counselors to find integrative solutions that best serve our youth and family voice.
- Youth peer specialists are living proof that recovery is possible.



# Graduation

- Graduates have fully completed the 6-month program including:
  - Follow through on treatment goals;
  - Meets all F.I.R.S.T. requirements; and
  - Not rearrested within 6 months.
- Graduates upon completion receive
  - A graduation ceremony
  - A certificate of completion
  - Begin process to seal arrest record
  - Continuity of care and are able to continue treatment with their current provider



# FIRST Success Story

- FIRST Referral 16-year-old youth charged with a misdemeanor family violence after physically assaulting her mother.
- Referred by the DA for the FIRST Program in September 2020
- HCJPD and MCOT Team worked collaboratively to ensure youth received intensive mental health services to treat her mental health diagnosis of MDD w/psychotic features and PTSD
- Youth was referred and accepted into Project CHANGE program where MCOT clinician, psychiatrist, and youth peer support specialist met weekly with the family to provide counseling, skills training, medication management, and family therapy
- After 9 months in treatment with Project CHANGE, youth experienced improved family relationships, was on track to graduate high school, successfully graduated from the FIRST program, continued to be compliant with medication, and attend therapy
- Graduated from the FIRST program: Arrest will be removed from her record

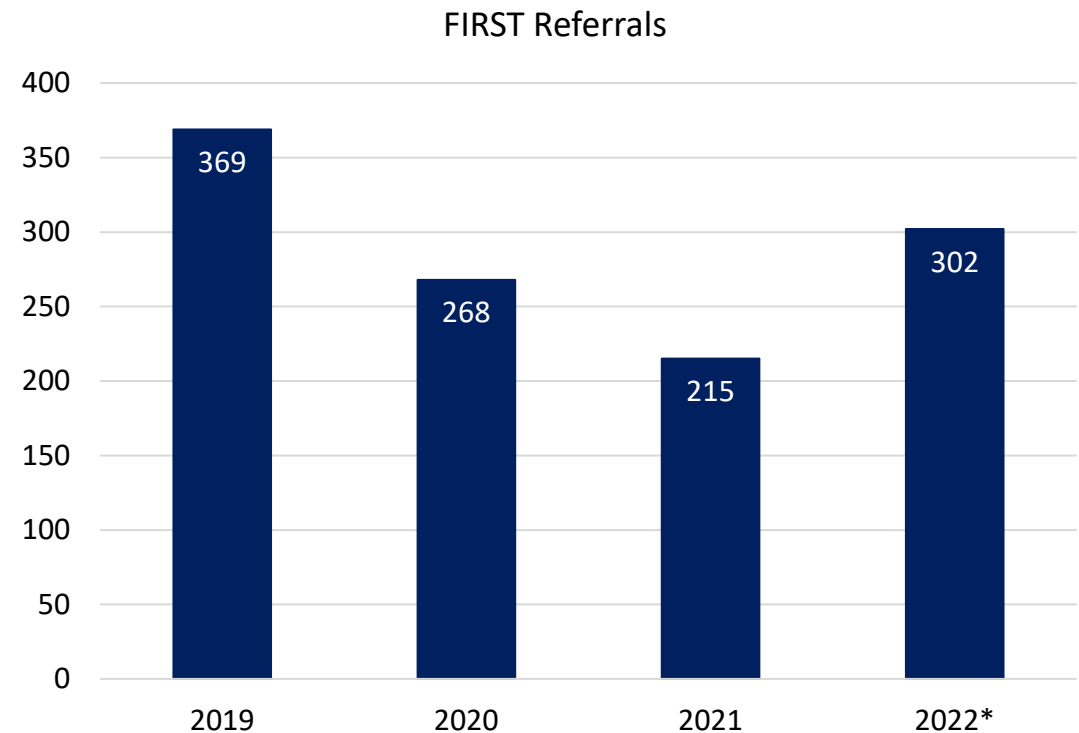
# FIRST Success Story

- In March 2022, a 15-year-old female attempted suicide by overdosing on medication.
- In May 2022, she was arrested for assaulting her mother by giving her a black eye
- She was recommended for FIRST. MCOT team provided mental health services, and she started back on anti-depressants.
- Youth disclosed a sexual assault to clinician, peer, and psychiatrist and that she experienced low self-esteem and engaged in self-harm.
- Today, she is an active participant with the YES Waiver program; graduated from the FIRST program; is attending school; and is building a positive relationship with family.

# Pre-Diversion Juvenile Stats 2018 vs Number of FIRST Referrals



- Total Number of Offenses for Mischief and Assault in 2018 = 949
- 285 of the 949 (30.0%) offenses had at least one admission on the respective referral
- Average length of stay for the 285 juveniles admitted to the detention center was about 35.3 days
- According to Justice System Partners' evaluation of FIRST, the overall completion rate was 71%.



\*Annualized based on Jan-Aug 2022



# Evaluation of FIRST Program



Justice System Partners' evaluation of 1,382 youth in the FIRST program found evidence of a 47% reduction in new referrals in the year after beginning the program.

JUSTICE SYSTEM PARTNERS



FIRST is particularly effective in reducing arrests for Black and Hispanic youth. Black youth experience a 39% reduction in new referrals, and Hispanic youth experience a 57% reduction in new referrals.



Girls who participate in the FIRST Program experienced a 78% reduction in new referrals compared to those in the comparison group.

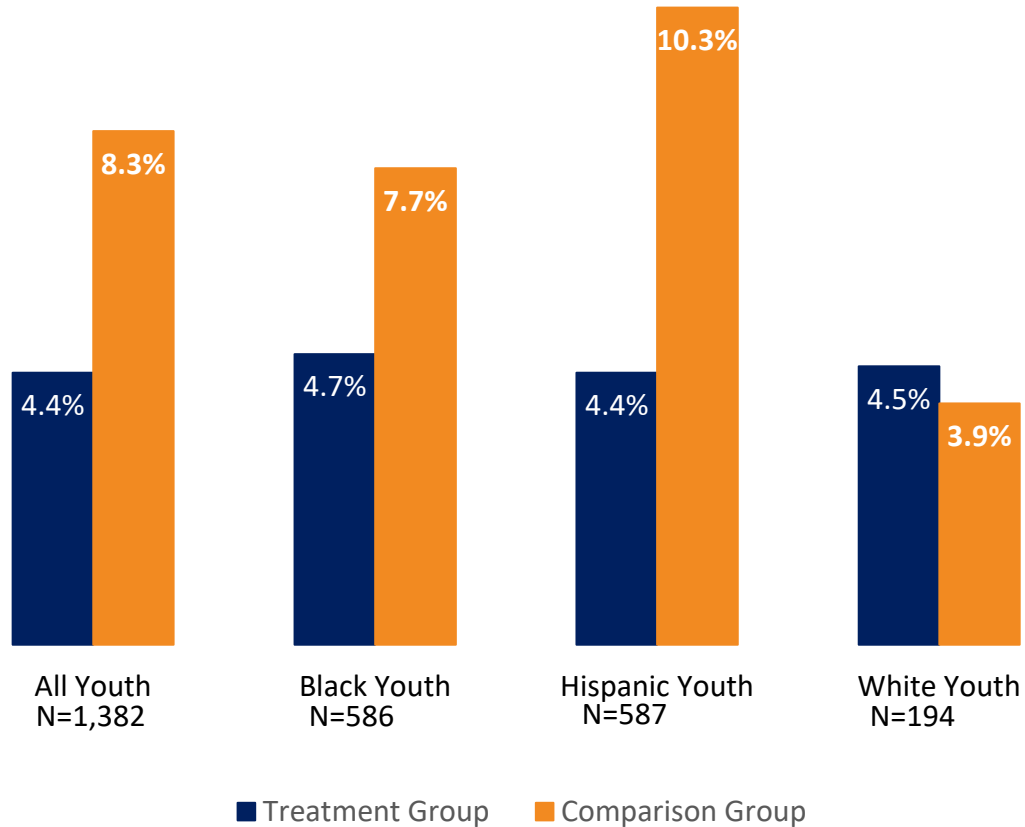


The evidence also indicated that the FIRST program is particularly effective in reducing new arrests for Hispanic girls. Hispanic girls who participate in FIRST experienced a 93% reduction in new referrals in the year following their program start date.

# Preliminary Evaluation Outcomes



Percent of Youth Receiving New Referral within 1 Year



Percent of Youth Receiving a New Referral within 1 Year by Race and Gender

