

Children's VOICE

Finding the Right
Treatment Program for
Kids in Child Welfare

**Maryville
Crisis Nursery:**
A Lifeline for Families
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Building Positive
**Parenting Practices
to Empower Families**

Finding the Right Treatment Program:

Adelphoi Engineers an Innovative Solution to a Systemic Problem

By Karyn Pratt



Participating in a horticulture program in Adelphoi.

Selecting the right treatment program for kids in child-serving systems is challenging. Clinical information can be inadequate or complex, and county and state agencies often don't have adequate time to fully evaluate all options for treatment. When counties and providers make the wrong decisions about treatment, kids experience disruptions in care and become stuck in the system, bouncing from placement to placement.

According to the PA Juvenile Justice Task Force, youth removed from home average two placements at residential facilities, with roughly one in four kids sent to three or more residential placements (Rubin et al., 2021). In addition, youth sent to residential placement spent 16 months away from home over the course of a case, averaging roughly 6.5 months out of home in each residential placement. Nearly 20% of these youth are cumulatively kept out of their homes for more than two years (Rubin et al., 2021).

Ultimately, this deep system involvement leads to additional trauma, more time away from families, educational disruption, decreased physical and mental health, and overall poor outcomes.

Adelphoi, a 50-year-old youth services provider based in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, recognized the connection between getting the kids it serves in the right programs and having them achieve success. In 2019, the organization began scrutinizing its outcomes for both kids who had successfully completed a program and those who had not, and commissioned a research study to understand the factors, as well as the combination of factors, that contribute to a youth's success in both completing a program and subsequently remaining out of the system after discharge.

From that endeavor, FirstMatch® was born. FirstMatch is a software platform developed by Adelphoi that uses predictive analytics to match youth in the child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health systems with the right treatment program the first time, significantly increasing the likelihood of a successful outcome.

When a child's clinical information is entered into FirstMatch, the application uses a trained algorithm to compare the predictive factors of the referred child to the historical outcomes achieved by unique programs for clients that presented with the same or similar predictive factors. Through the use of predictive analytics, the tool recommends the most appropriate program



Adelphoi youth engage in a homemaking program.

for the child based upon their unique, individual needs. The tool also predicts the likelihood of the youth completing that program and remaining out of care, along with other desired outcomes. This information can then be used by the treatment decision-maker to make the appropriate recommendation for care for that child.

Adelphoi began using this platform in early 2020 for the more than 900 residential referrals that are made to Adelphoi each year. But that was just the beginning. Recognizing the broader implications of this research and its usefulness for treatment decision-makers, Adelphoi evolved FirstMatch into a multi-tier platform suitable for use by providers and county and state organizations.

Mark Mortimer, COO of Adelphoi, explains, “The trauma to kids and cost to the system from inappropriate placements is enormous. When kids continuously cycle through programming, their families start to give up. We believe that children deserve the best possible opportunity for success, and FirstMatch offers that opportunity.” To date, Adelphoi has seen a 20% improvement in its program completion rates for

youth who are placed in programs based upon FirstMatch recommendations.

FirstMatch offers organizations across the country the ability to leverage their own unique data to make appropriate treatment matches for their children. The tool can be trained to make predictions on many possible outcomes, including program completion, remain-out-of-care, permanency maintained, risk reduction, graduation/attendance, re-hospitalization, and more. Child-serving entities can provide children in their care with the most appropriate match within their ecosystem of services.

Lynnet Scully, Director of Admissions at Perseus House in Erie, Pennsylvania, is one of the users of the FirstMatch tool. “We chose to implement FirstMatch to streamline our referral process and to use data to target populations that we have the most success with,” she notes. “This allows us to serve the highest number of clients that align with our target population and reduce the number of incidents commonly associated with an unsuccessful placement.” Ultimately, this alignment leads to the reduction of multiple placements, youth

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spending less time in the system, a reduction in youth and family trauma, and overall better outcomes for children, families, and providers.

According to the PA Juvenile Justice Task Force research, there are large disparities in the outcomes youth experience when they are involved in the juvenile justice system. For example, black male youth stay under probation supervision the longest, averaging 42 months (Rubin et al., 2021). FirstMatch adds a layer of structured decision-making at critical junctions, including diversion, community-based interventions, and out-of-home placements, ultimately allowing for more informed, consistent and data-driven systems. The goal is to eliminate bias through the use of a structured decision-making system tool such as FirstMatch at each one of those critical intersections. FirstMatch users are positioned to view their data from a racially sensitive lens and are informed of disparities that may have existed in any historical data. They are then able to work toward more inclusive internal policies, protocols, and guidelines to reduce any future or continued bias.

Since the development of the tool, Adelphoi has worked with the Richard King Mellon Foundation, the Staunton Farm Foundation, the Henry L. Hillman Foundation, and others that have provided support for the scaling and rollout of FirstMatch to other providers as well as state and county entities. The FirstMatch team is also currently expanding the scope

of the tool to include using predictive analytics to match children in the child welfare system with the most appropriate foster family.

According to Sue Christner, Deputy Director of Lebanon County Juvenile Probation, “FirstMatch has significant implications for the entire child welfare, behavioral health, and juvenile justice system. Broad adoption of FirstMatch will allow counties and states to reduce the number of placements, therefore offering significant savings to an overburdened system.”

Adelphoi estimates that in Pennsylvania alone, a 7% reduction in the number of kids that need a second placement will yield approximately \$30 million in annual savings. Less placement will allow counties and states to decrease case-loads and reinvest in critical programming, including more funding for essential prevention and aftercare services. As Joni Schwager, Executive Director of Staunton Farm Foundation notes, “I truly believe this platform has the potential to catalyze change through the child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health systems.”

To learn more about FirstMatch, visit www.firstmatch.com. ■



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Reference

Rubin, J. et al. (2021). The Pennsylvania Juvenile Task Force report & recommendations. Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force. https://www.pacourts.us/Storage/media/pdfs/20210622/152647-pajuvenilejusticetaskforcereportandrecommendations_final.pdf