

Department of Children and Families

Wilderness School Annual Report



*Submitted to the State Advisory Council on Children and Families
pursuant to Section 17a-32a of the Connecticut General Statutes*

February 2010

WILDERNESS SCHOOL

I. 2009 Overview and Description of Services

The Wilderness School is a prevention, intervention, and transition program for troubled youth from Connecticut. The program is supported by the State Department of Children and Families (DCF) in addition to a tuition fee program utilizing a private funding base.

The Wilderness School offers high impact wilderness programs intended to foster positive youth development. Designed as a journey experience, our program is based upon the philosophies of experiential learning and is considered therapeutic for the participant. Studies have documented Wilderness School's impact upon adolescents in the areas of self-esteem, locus of control (personal responsibility), and interpersonal skill enhancement.



In the summer, students attend 20-Day and 5-Day Expeditions in groups of ten with two or three Instructors and with the support of base camp staff. The Wilderness School also conducts numerous 1-Day programs year round and summer camp functions for groups seeking adventure education services.

1-Day programs may be Wilderness Challenge activities such as rock climbing, ropes course, canoeing or cross country skiing, or group initiative courses designed for specific groups and programs.

Each entering Expedition student must pass through an Orientation phase of the Wilderness School prior to attending a 20-Day or 5-Day program. Students are required to set goals for their experiences with the program and for their lives in the community once they have finished their courses. All 20-Day and 5-Day Expedition Program students are eligible to participate in a fall through spring Follow-Up Program. Those attending 1-day programs may elect to apply for 20-day or 5-day Expeditions. The Wilderness School student population is diverse and representative of varied backgrounds.

The Wilderness School is licensed as a Youth Camp by the State of Connecticut Department of Public Health.

II. Student Population

Wilderness School is a referral program servicing DCF adolescents in addition to youth referred by agencies such as youth service bureaus, school systems, residential programs, probation and parole offices. Students attending the program may exhibit school problems, have police or court contact, or be involved in counseling or psychiatric care. Wilderness School applicants may be male or female and must be at least thirteen years old.

Wilderness School 20-Day Expedition courses are enrolled in single gender groupings according to the open enrollment of the course. When courses are over-enrolled with either male or female students, mixed gender groupings may be considered based upon the discretion of the Wilderness School. Wilderness School 5-Day Expeditions may be either single or mixed gender courses.

Wilderness School Outreach Programs are designed to increase access to the program for youth in more restrictive out of home care settings as well as other youth not yet appropriate for more intensive Wilderness School activities. This may include residents of DCF facilities, incarcerated (juvenile justice) boys and girls, youth with special requirements for participation, and other special populations.

Programs vary in duration and skills or abilities required, and are designed to provide an entry level experience with the Wilderness School. Activities range from evening campfires to full day initiative activity programs for group development. Participants may progress from Outreach activities to DCF Wilderness Challenge programs as well as Expeditions.

Key indicators for the Wilderness School program include the course completion rate of 20-Day and 5-Day Expeditions as well as the number of youth served annually through both the Expedition Program and programs utilizing Short Courses, such as Outreach and DCF Adolescent Services.

The 2009 Course completion rate was 90.4%. The number of youth involved with the Department of Children and Families in 2009 was 67.7%, with 22.7% non-DCF involved.

The total number of 2009 youth served in all programs was 685, an increase of 135 from 2008.

III. Major Events and Activities

A. Re-Assignment of DCF Program Oversight

The Wilderness School was re-assigned to the DCF Bureau of Prevention from the Bureau of Adolescent Services as part of the agency re-organization taking place from 2008-09. The effective date for this was July 1, 2009.

Immediate actions included initiatives by Bureau of Prevention personnel and Wilderness School administrative staff concerning two fulltime positions (see below).

Current initiatives include increased coordination between the Wilderness School and other Prevention programs, especially Family With Service Needs and Positive Youth Development Initiative program participants.

The objectives are twofold: To increase Wilderness School services for children and youth in a preventive capacity; and to increase community and family referrals for the Wilderness School's other programs utilizing the Fee for Service Program.

B. Change in Administrative Personnel

Wilderness School program leadership experienced the first significant change in over twenty years in 2009. This took place when the Director of the Wilderness School, Thomas A. Dyer, retired with the State of Connecticut Retirement Incentive Program June 30, 2009.

The most recent changes in lead personnel had taken place in 1987, when this writer has hired as the Assistant Director and in 1983, when Mr. Dyer was hired as Director.

The DCF Bureau of Prevention assigned the Wilderness School Assistant Director to serve as Acting Director and took actions required to refill the Director position. Initial requirements were approved by August, 2009, although authorization to complete the process of hiring for the Director position was delayed until December 2009.

The refill of the Director position is critical to the integrity of the Wilderness School and should be considered a leading priority.

C. Wilderness School Current Status

Overview: The Governor's May 28 proposed budget included the removal of funding for the Wilderness School due to the State of Connecticut budget crisis.

Contingent plans to close the facility were developed and included an immediate closing date in June 2009 and an additional closing date in August 2009.

The Wilderness School continued full operations through the summer season, first, and has subsequently sustained full operations into 2010.

Continued stabilization of the Wilderness School's status is also required to preserve the integrity of the school and its services, and is a high priority.

D. Additional Staffing and Human Resources:

The Wilderness School is currently staff by five fulltime positions. These are: 1) (Acting) Director; and 2) four Field Program Coordinators in the following functional titles -- Program Coordinator, Field Coordinator, Enrollment Coordinator and Outreach Coordinator.

The total position count at the Wilderness School remained at thirty-one staff, with the addition of twenty-five Summer Workers.

Additional Human Resources activities for fulltime staffing in 2009 included the re-authorization of a durational Field Program Coordinator position assigned to the functional title of Program Director.

Funding for the durational Field Program Coordinator position was extended from monies received from Chafee funds through adolescent services.

This position replaced the position of the same title lost to State layoffs in 2004. (one other position, Business Manager, was lost in 2004 and has not been replaced).

Extension of the durational Field Program Coordinator in October, 2010, is a high priority due to the lead responsibilities assigned to this position: supervision of up all course instruction, instructor supervision and training, mentoring, and program safety operations.

In the absence of the Field Program Coordinator, these duties are assigned in September through March to the Assistant Director (these duties shift to a seasonal Summer Worker in April through August).

Twenty-five (25) Summer Worker positions were requested and approved for 2009 seasonal staffing. As in the past, positions assigned to spring and summer work began in April, 2009, while positions assigned to summer and fall began in June, 2009.

The 2010 position request has been filed with DCF Human Resources; and approval of all Wilderness School 2010 Summer Worker positions is required for full operations of the program and is a high priority -- services will be reduced without all positions.

Note: Summer Worker positions were subject to the increase in the State of CT minimum wage, which will potentially require a revision in the State job specification by DAS.

IV. Fiscal

A. Fee For Service Program

As in the past, monies from the Fee for Service Program were assigned to a dedicated account utilized by Wilderness School to provide payroll for fifteen of the program's twenty-five seasonal Summer Worker staff positions. The remaining eleven Wilderness School Summer Worker positions were funded by the General Fund.

B. Income/Expenses

FY 2009 Tuition Income

FY 2009 Tuition Account Expenses

Agency Payments \$99,200.00

Private, fundraised \$22,950.00

<u>Family</u>	<u>\$17,300.00</u>	<u>Personnel*</u>	<u>\$104,250.00</u>
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Total	\$139,450.00		\$104,250.00
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*Summer Workers, via dedicated funds of the Fee for Service Program

General Fund

Personnel 1:	\$494,501.98
Personnel 2:	\$100,000.00*
Operating Expenses:	\$117,684.92
Total FY 09:	\$712,186.90

*Summer Workers

Notes:

1. Family tuition payments increase from \$3,900.00 in 2008 to \$17,300.00 in 2009.
2. Agency tuition payments increased from \$87,400.00 in 08 to \$99,200.00 in 09.
3. While reasons for this are unclear at this time, possible influences include
 - a. The development of the program webpage as a recruitment tool
 - b. The use of the DVD and simplified Enrollment Office procedures to make the student application process easier to the program easier
 - c. The use of experiential Orientation programs as a method to inspire and motivate potential participants.

FY 2010 Income Projections

The current balance in available funds for seasonal staffing is \$35,200.00, with an additional amount of \$21,000 anticipated for an unpaid 2009 tuition fee.

The total balance will be \$56,200.00 for the beginning of 2010 staffing in April.

Note: approximately \$115,000.00 in the Wilderness School dedicated account was included in a year-end sweep of unencumbered funds in June 2009.

Continued income development and diversification is a high priority.

V. Licensing

The Wilderness School was again licensed as a Youth Camp by the State of Connecticut, Department of Public Health for 2009-2010.

This marked the second consecutive year of Youth Camp licensing after having not applied to DPH in 2007 due to administrative review of license requirements. The Wilderness School passed DPH inspection with minimal corrective actions required, and is considered a model program.

The Wilderness School continued to utilize a personal services contract for a Youth Camp Physician with Mohamed S. Khera, M.D. The fee for this contract is \$10,000.00.

Additional fees for DPH required trainings (life guards, waterfront safety, canoeing) were avoided in 2009 when returning seasonal staff possessed adequate certifications to implement programs without re-training staff. This represented a savings of approximately \$2,000.00.

Continued savings in DPH mandated training costs when possible is a priority.

VI. Physical Plant/Engineering

Current Status: The status of the Wilderness School Base Camp is improved from two concerns carried over from 2008.

The installation of a 1,000.00 gallon propane tank feeding the facility emergency generator was completed in December 2009 and was considered an essential improvement.

The failure of the generator during a major ice storm in December 21, 2008, as well as several incidences of frozen pipes and both underground and interior water damage since the opening of the base camp in 1990, required a considerable increase in fuel capacity in order to power the generator effectively.

In addition, the ineffective installation in 2008 of a heated sidewalk designed to prevent dangerous ice build-up at the main entrance of the Wilderness School was resolved in fall, 2009. The sidewalk's poor concrete had eroded the surface layer of the walkway and exposed electrical wiring, and buckled concrete had caused a tripping hazard.

DCF Engineering oversaw the successful completion of the sidewalk repairs by November 2009.

Numerous small repairs and upgrades were completed by program staff and in conjunction with DCF Engineering.

2010 Initiatives: Current priorities for the Wilderness School facility are the replacement of roofing on the current Program Building and Program Garage. Roofing is in poor to fair condition and will pose a threat to the integrity of the structures. This is a high priority.

In addition, a proposal to increase the energy efficiency of the Administration Building by conversion to hot water heating should be evaluated, as should the proposal to replace several existing windows with energy efficient windows. This is of importance.

VII. Agency Development, Outreach and Student Enrollment

The Wilderness School Enrollment Office and Outreach Program operated for the second year since the 2008 abolishment of the Intake Department.

The primary features of this transition were:

- A. Simplifying screening functions for prospective students and referring agency staff in the community and area offices.
- B. The transference of all student interviews and primary emotional and clinical assessments to agency personnel in the community.
- C. Wilderness School Outreach Programs expanding to youth not eligible for more intensive wilderness challenges.
- D. Wilderness School Orientation functions becoming active and experiential, and behaviorally focused.

Subsequently, prospective students participated in program activities, and program informational functions were revised from large, staff intensive community presentations to individualized student/family/community worker sessions. Consequently, assessment functions were transitioned from Wilderness School staff to professionals known to the student, and took place in the privacy of an individual office.

This was made possible, in part, by the development of the Wilderness School DVD and program website for Orientation information.

Also, the development of new enrollment materials that were more focused on current student behavioral risk factors, as well as histories over two years when appropriate, has simplified enrollment for both program staff and the referral community.

With the removal of clinical assessments from Wilderness School staff functions, the process of screening and enrolling students has allowed three Summer Workers to be re-assigned to field work, and one fulltime staff to lead the development of the Outreach Program.

Participant numbers have increased and course completion rates have increased in two consecutive summer programs.

VIII. Program Development

Initiatives to increase services with CJTS youth, FWSN youth, PYDI youth as well as youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder have been integrated into the Wilderness School program calendar. This calendar is now at or near capacity for the eighteen month period of January 2010 to July 2011.

The immediate initiative of the Wilderness School program staff will be to complete training of up to thirty new referring agency staff through development of the above programs and to increase students in Orientation, Outreach, and Expedition programs.

Wilderness School participants increased from seven hundred and fifty to eight hundred and thirty-five in 2008-09. The secondary objective of the Wilderness School program staff will be to maintain increased program participation and increase programming opportunities in available calendar dates.

IX. Current Initiatives:

Current initiatives for the administration of the Wilderness School program include:

A. Establishment of an Advisory Board as required by Public Act No. 09-205, An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Program Review and Investigations Committee Concerning the Department of Children and Families.

B. Continued stabilization of the Wilderness School's operational status; and preservation of program integrity and services.

1. Continue full operational status and continue innovative program development

2. Increase Wilderness School services for children and youth in a preventive capacity

3. Development of revised Wilderness School Strategic Plan, to be initiated in January 2010 and completed in June 2010.

4. Appointment of a permanent Director by the DCF Bureau of Prevention and Human Resources.

5. Extension of the durational Field Program Coordinator in October, 2010, serving as Program Coordinator and assuming lead responsibilities for supervision of all course instruction, instructor supervision and training, mentoring, and program safety operations.

6. Secure approval for 2010 position request of Summer Worker positions required for full operations of the spring summer and fall programs. Note services will be reduced without approval of all positions.

C. Continued income development and diversification.

1. Continued development of existing program income by strengthening established areas of tuition income, including current levels of both DCF and non DCF referrals

2. Continued development of new (2009 and 2010) areas of income by maintaining current contracts and pilot programs, and establishing new contracts with both community and other State agencies, including:

a. Summer camp services for youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder through FOCUS Youth Alternatives;

b. Increasing programs and services for DCF youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder;

c. Increasing programs and services for DCF juvenile justice youth residents of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School;

d. Increasing programs and services for DCF youth participating in Family With Service Needs programs;

e. Increasing programs and services for DCF youth participating in Positive Youth Development Initiative programs, and

f. Utilization of available program calendar opportunities (to be determined) for additional fee for service contracts including leadership and communication program trainings.

3. Continued development of the Wilderness School private funding campaign through new grant preparation and management, and development of programs established by regional grant awards.

a. Increase programs attached to the Wilderness School Hartford Initiative by utilizing Hartford Foundation funds to increase services to Hartford Public Schools and Hartford/East Hartford Youth Service Bureaus; and to other Hartford area community agencies.

b. Increase funding attached to the JANA Fund supporting New Haven area youth participating in Wilderness School programs;

c. Re-establish Fairfield County Cooperative Foundation funds for Bridgeport, Norwalk, Stamford and Danbury youth to participate in Wilderness School programs.

d. Increase funding attached to the Jason William Hunt Foundation by supporting fundraising efforts for this foundation in Connecticut.

e. Conduct a needs assessment for and evaluate the feasibility of developing a Wilderness School Alumni Association.

4. Development of additional marketing strategies and operations, including full revision of the program website from an informational training resource to a youth, family, and community agency recruitment tool; and more user-friendly and kid-friendly body of material.

D. Secure current priorities for the Wilderness School facility, as follows:

1. Replacement of roofing on the current Program Building and Program Garage.

2. Evaluate proposal to increase the energy efficiency of the Administration Building by conversion to hot water heating and replace several existing windows with energy efficient windows.

APPENDIX

SECTION 17a-32a OF THE CONNECTICUT GENERAL STATUTES

Sec. 17a-32a. Children's facilities' annual report to State Advisory Council on Children and Families and advisory groups. (a) The facilities that come under the jurisdiction of the Department of Children and Families, as enumerated in section 17a-32, shall submit an annual report to the State Advisory Council on Children and Families and to their respective advisory groups, established pursuant to subsection (b) of section 17a-6. The report shall include, but not be limited to: (1) Aggregate profiles of the residents; (2) a description of and update on major initiatives; (3) key outcome indicators and results; (4) costs associated with operating the facility; and (5) a description of educational, vocational and literacy programs, and behavioral, treatment and other services available to the residents and their outcomes. Each report submitted pursuant to this subsection shall be posted on the department's web site.

(b) Such advisory groups shall respond to their facility's annual report, submitted pursuant to subsection (a) of this section, and provide any recommendations for improvement or enhancement that they deem necessary.

(c) The Department of Children and Families shall serve as administrative staff of such advisory groups.

(P.A. 09-205, S. 3.)

History: P.A. 09-205 effective July 1, 2009.