



*Top: Sheelagh Kelly (left) Jailene Derisse (middle), Adriano Calabrese (right)
Bottom: Alana Sejdic (left), Cynthia Middleton (middle), Beatrice Alicea (right)
Not pictured: Jessica Pizzoferrato and Chelsea Powell*

PSS Adriano Calabrese, who comes to the job with over 20 years in Juvenile Justice, agrees with that sentiment. Adriano said it takes a true team effort between a PSS, a school district, and others to help the youth return to school and graduate. Along the way, that usually requires managing any logistical loose ends and navigating through bureaucratic "red tape".

"This unit supports students in Juvenile Justice facilities to help their educational transition once they return to their communities. We do that by working collaboratively with educators and service providers to best serve the student and make sure that transition is successful," he said.

The youth served by the PSS team are generally a transient population, so it is not uncommon for the day-to-day of a PSS includes finding missing credits when transcripts are not updated for one reason or another. Using a timeline, the PSS fills in the missing pieces to make sure they get the credits.

In the process of changing school districts, this may seem like a minor step for a student who has had a lifelong support network. However, for a youth who has spent time in a detention facility, having an adult who knows how to chase down credits can make all the difference when it comes to graduating sooner and not repeating steps.

"Students don't always know to say that they completed these credits. This is work that they accomplished and should get credit for it," said Alana Sejdic, a PSS assigned to Manson Youth Institution.



Alana explained the job as such: "I came to the position as a special education teacher but many of the people on the team have backgrounds as school social workers. I meet with the students while they're in Manson attending school in one way or another and do an intake process, build rapport and figure out the goals they want to pursue when they get released."

Although most of the youth are attending school in one way or another, some are hesitant to return to a traditional educational setting, discouraged by the position they find themselves when incarcerated. Alana said she encourages them and tries to convince them to continue their education. She recalls one youth playfully getting annoyed with her for her persistence in trying to convince him to return to the classroom.

"But I kept going back anyway," Alana chuckles. "Eventually we got him enrolled back in school, so I was glad that I stuck with it."

Fellow PSS Sheelagh Kelly has had similar experiences, but she has noticed that parents, youth, and school districts appreciate that the assigned PSS comes to the table as an advocate for the student. Sheelagh said it is not uncommon for it to take some time for the youth to warm up to their PSS but, once released, she said her students are the ones calling her every day - even the youth who were initially tentative about her involvement.



"Once they get to know you and you build that rapport. Once they see you're on their team advocating for their future, and not just education, they come around and say 'wow, this person's here for me'," Sheelagh stated.

She remembers one youth in particular who had returned to their community only to be placed in an alternative setting. The student, however, really wanted to get the full high school experience.

Working with the family and school district, Sheelagh helped get the student re-enrolled. The student is now on their way to fulfilling their dream of attending prom and walking across the graduation stage by the end of the year.

Asked if she thinks the PSS team is making a difference Sheelagh said, "There's an ombudsman that interviewed the students [at Hartford Juvenile Detention Center] about what services are working or what they find valuable - they mentioned their work with the PSS and my name specifically."

"Sometimes it's hard because you ask, 'am I really making a difference?' That stuck out for me because not only do I see the value in them, but they see the value in me too."

In addition to helping the youth earn a diploma, the members of the PSS unit do everything from providing a shoulder to lean on to connecting them to vocational pathways and finding other options to get them back on track.

Like any social services professional with a deep passion for the work, the PSS team go above and beyond to "show up" for their clients when they are in crisis. Simon, a 19-year-old youth from the New Haven area, described his PSS Alana Sejdic as "just a great human being" who has been extremely helpful in all aspects of his life.



Simon met Alana while incarcerated in one of the state's juvenile justice facilities. Due to pending charges against him, he was not allowed return to his former high school. That did not stop Alana and Simon from strategizing on the next steps for Simon's future.

"When I was in there, she helped me sign up for Job Corps and get class credit. Since I've been home, she's helped me find a job and look at trade schools before enrolling in adult education. She helped me get clothes for my little brother and my friends."

The PSS team said typical young people they come into contact with are just not used to experiencing success with adults in similar roles whether in a facility or in a classroom. Simon was asked the difference between his interactions with Alana and the other adults he has come into contact within the juvenile justice system.

Without hesitation he said, "I feel like I can go to Alana for anything."

"Alana is more focused on my future. She wasn't focused on the now but was like 'what are we going to do moving forward?'"

Terri Palmer, mother of teenager Adam, described seeing her son come out of his shell during his work with PSS Adriano.

"Adam was stand offish at first. He said, 'I don't want to talk to these people.' But he ended up getting it together."



While Adam "doesn't really show emotion", he spent his first Mother's Day away from Terri which she said caused him to break down in tears. By the time Adriano connected with Adam, Terri said her son had matured a lot and was more acceptant to the help.

"Actually, the more Adam got into trouble the better the communication we had. Missing all these life events [during his incarceration] - he lost his grandmother, he lost my father recently, missing holidays - he couldn't be there for that, and it was an eye opener for him."

Asked if she thought Adriano's involvement with Adam helped his process of transitioning back to school and his community and to start thinking about his future, Terri said, "Yes it did."

Terri is just really glad her son is taking advantage of the services that are in place for him.

"It helped him to be more expressive. He's opened his mind to pursuing higher education after high school and even taking college prep courses, essays, interviews, all of that."

The goal of establishing the PSS unit was to help students transition back to school, back to their community and, ultimately, back to some sense of normalcy with a chance to thrive. If performance is the only valid test of a program's effectiveness, then the support provided, the bonds built, and the progress made between the PSSs and their students over the past year are tangible proof of its success.