



## National Assessment Center Association

The National Assessment Center Association (NAC) guides a partnership of assessment centers that advance best practice through advocacy, education, technical assistance, and community engagement.

Request a community training on the assessment center framework to start educating your community and stakeholders at

[www.nacassociation.org](http://www.nacassociation.org)

"I have been a law enforcement officer for thirty-four years and have worked in all aspects of the job... Juvenile Assessment Centers are trained, experienced, and connected to the appropriate resources for our youth and are the ones we trust and depend upon to make the appropriate referrals and connections to the resources the youth and families need. Law enforcement is a collaborative partner to our JAC, and we depend upon our JAC to make these appropriate referrals and connections for the families. The Juvenile Assessment Center model is the bedrock to services we depend upon for our citizens."

- Chief Kevin Duffy; Douglas County Colorado Sheriff's Office



# The Critical Role of Connector

## *How Assessment Centers Address Capacity, Facilitate Access, and Eliminate Service Fatigue*

### Assessment Centers

Assessment Centers throughout the United States are known by many names such as resource, intervention, diversion, access, or connection centers. They offer a valuable resource to youth, families, and communities by providing early intervention and an avenue to address concerning behavior. Individuals who come into contact with youth facing difficulties or displaying worrisome behavior, such as parents, school staff, law enforcement, courts, or members of the community, can refer them to an Assessment Center.

Once referred, Centers engage with both youth and families, attentively listening to their struggles and strengths, in order to gain insight into the difficulties they are facing within their home, school, or community environments. Assessment Centers then facilitate the process of connecting with individualized community resources, aimed at assisting them in overcoming the obstacles they encounter.

Ultimately, Assessment Centers offer a single point of access to connect youth and their families with community resources that build on their strengths and address underlying needs.

### Benefits of the Connector

The role of a connector, often overlooked but essential, encompasses several critical aspects:

- **Stakeholder Roles and Responsibilities:** Assessment Centers establish appropriate roles and responsibilities among stakeholders, ensuring effective collaboration and communication.
- **Capacity Enhancement:** Assessment Centers enhance the capacity of stakeholders by providing expertise and access to resources beyond their scope.
- **Facilitating Timely Access:** By streamlining access to services, Assessment Centers ensure that youth and families receive the right support at the right time.
- **Preventing Service Fatigue:** Addressing concerns promptly and accurately helps prevent service fatigue among youth and families, maintaining engagement.
- **Cost Efficiency:** Assessment Centers save taxpayer dollars by directing resources to appropriate services and reducing inefficiencies.



## The Connector Role



"Juvenile court judges possess extensive legal education, training, and experience. Our position requires weighing evidence and application of the law to the facts, which includes risk assessments. We are routinely presented with youth appearing to struggle with behavioral health challenges and families with apparent struggles to fulfill basic household needs. This regularly pulls judges from their scope of expertise as judicial officers into behavioral health realms to figure out what is needed for successful rehabilitation of a youth. My court contracts with the St. Charles CARE Center...The results have been observable reductions in recidivism and better outcomes for youth and families in my community."

**- Judge Timothy S. Marcel St. Charles Parish, Louisiana**



Serving as the connector, Assessment Centers are required to have a thorough understanding of the various services and supports available in the community. When connecting youth and families, an Assessment Center "toolbox" must include services and supports that address basic, prosocial, therapeutic, and recreational needs. Knowledge of what is available helps support the important role of working with the family to identify the right supports for them and help access those supports.

The success of Assessment Centers relies on fostering strong relationships with stakeholders such as law enforcement, schools, courts, and community organizations. Frequent communication, shared benefits, and mutual understanding create an environment of collaboration, ensuring that the services provided are aligned with the needs of youth and families.

### Law Enforcement and School Roles & Responsibilities

#### Law Enforcement

Law enforcement's core responsibilities encompass investigating, apprehending, and detaining individuals under suspicion of criminal activities. Officers respond to incidents involving potential offenses or disturbances, undertaking investigations to ensure public safety.

Law enforcement personnel may lack comprehensive training in youth mental health and adolescent development. Moreover, their awareness of the array of community support

organizations and their ability to effectively align youth and family needs with available resources may be limited.

#### School

The American Association of School Counselors delineates the duties and obligations of counselors, which include (1) implementing strategies for academic achievement, (2) navigating emotional well-being and interpersonal competencies, and (3) devising plans for postsecondary pathways (higher education, military, workforce). While this may entail brief counseling and referring individuals to community support, it's notable that the counselor-to-student ratio across the nation was 408-to-1 during the 2021–2022 school year, based on the latest available data. This figure exceeds the recommended ratio of 250-to-1.

School psychologists, facing an even more challenging scenario, encountered a ratio of 1127-to-1 during the same period, contrary to the recommended 500-to-1 ratio.

The responsibilities and limited capacities of school and law enforcement professionals hinder their ability to: (1) possess the expertise needed for conducting strength-based screening and assessment of youth and family needs; (2) accurately identify the appropriate community supports and services that align with those needs; (3) effectively guide families through the process of accessing these supports and services.



## The Connector Role



"New to Nevada needing help with daughter, this program helped me get in touch with after school programs and therapy. I don't know how I would have found the resources without the help of The Harbor. Truly is a blessing"

**-Clark County, NV  
Parent**



When attempting to fulfill this connecting role without an in-depth grasp of the needs of youth and families and the extensive range of community resources available, officers or school personnel might inadvertently recommend services based on an assumption the referral will address the underlying needs of youth and families. Making referrals without a comprehensive understanding of youth and family needs not only results in them slipping through the cracks, but also contributes to "service fatigue" (explained below).

### Court Roles and Responsibilities

Assessment Centers mitigate the need for court involvement to access community services, providing families with direct support. While the role of probation and parole officers are changing to focus more on partnering and supporting youth and family, it should not be necessary for youth and families to enter into a court system to get access to community-based services and support. Too often, youth and families cannot get access to specific and needed services without having system involvement.

### Youth & Family Self Navigation

When parents are struggling with their child's behavior, knowing where to start or how to access services is overwhelming. Creating a community hub whose role is to understand what youth and families are experiencing and help them access the most appropriate support alleviates the caregiver's burden of knowing which services are the right ones.

Assessment Centers alleviate the challenge of navigating services by acting as community hubs. These centers understand individual strengths and needs, empowering youth and families to choose from a range of appropriate support options, fostering engagement and empowerment. Creating this connection hub gives youth and families choice!

### The Pitfalls of One-Size-Fits-All Approaches

Communities developing diversion or prevention efforts where all youth and families are referred directly to a specific service provider or program should be cautious. This approach fails to recognize the individual needs of youth and families and removes any neutrality from the referral process. For example, referring all youth to a pro-social or recreation activity such as canoe building or outdoor exploration, fails to address a family's lack of housing and food. Similarly, sending all youth to a Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) provider, misuses funds and resources by serving youth and families who may not need that level of therapy. This contributes to increased wait times for youth and families who do need the service.

This approach also fails to give youth and families input and choice in the service and provider.

While diversion efforts are valuable, a one-size-fits-all approach lacks consideration for individualized needs. This approach can overlook critical needs and lead to service fatigue, wherein youth and families disengage due to ineffective solutions. The role of Assessment



## The Connector Role



"The idea is to present the family with options for services and let them decide which options suit them the best. Abstaining from the service provider community means being an impartial advocate for the family."

**- Anne Robinson The Front Porch Director**



Centers in connecting families to personalized resources is essential in preventing these pitfalls.

### Service Fatigue and Its Consequences

Service fatigue arises when families receive inadequate or mismatched services, leading to disengagement. The resultant loss of trust in service providers and disinterest in further referrals can be detrimental.

Effective Assessment Centers help alleviate service fatigue by ensuring accurate matches between families and resources.

### The Cost of Misaligned Services

Misaligned services come at a high cost, both financially and socially. One study has shown that if youth and family are connected to supportive services, the community receives quantifiable benefits to taxpayers due to reduced costs of crimes (Justice Policy Institute).

Communities bear the brunt of inefficient service provision, resulting in wasted resources and reduced positive outcomes. Effective Assessment Centers optimize resource allocation by connecting youth and families to appropriate services.

### Conclusion

Assessment Centers play a crucial role as connectors, bridging the gap between stakeholders and community resources. By offering tailored support, preventing service fatigue, and optimizing resource allocation, Assessment Centers contribute to the overall well-being of youth, families, and communities.

*You can have the best service in the world, but if you aren't getting the right kids based on the need and risk level, it won't be an effective service or the right use of resources."*

**- Kena Vassar UTHSC Center for Youth Advocacy and Well-being Director of Community Initiatives**