



# Legislative Audit Division

## Performance Audit Summary

### Montana Youth Challenge Program

March 2005

#### Introduction

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The Youth Challenge program was created by the U.S. Congress in 1992 and has been adopted by approximately half of the states. The Montana Youth Challenge Program (MYCP) was established in 1999. It targets youth with at-risk behaviors such as violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and criminal behavior. High school dropouts aged 16–18 are targeted as at-risk. MYCP is a 22-week residential program in Dillon, Montana, followed by a 12-month community-based mentoring program. Montana's program is administered through the Department of Military Affairs.

#### Background

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MYCP attempts to prevent, rather than treat, destructive behaviors. Participation is voluntary and applicants must meet certain eligibility requirements, including being drug-free, not having previous felony convictions, and not being involved in ongoing court actions. MYCP strives to recruit approximately 100 cadets for each of two classes per year (starting either in January or June). Since 1999, MYCP has graduated 11 classes and 852 cadets (28% of cadets enrolled in the residential phase have not graduated).

#### Program Administration

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The program has three major administrative components: funding, staffing and education. One audit objective was to determine how these components impact program effectiveness and attainment of goals and objectives.

MYCP operates with an annual budget of approximately \$2.8 million, and the budget is based on a target enrollment of 200 students per year. The estimated cost per student is \$14,000 a year. We calculated program cost per day for the residential portion of MYCP. Based on expenditures for fiscal years 2003-2004, the residential cost per student is approximately \$93 per day. This cost per day is relatively low when compared to other at-risk youth programs.

MYCP is authorized 47 FTE positions, including management and administrative staff, teaching staff, counseling and health care staff, and cadre staff (responsible for supervision and physical training). The federal government defines the number of required staff for Challenge programs through use of a model, which sets a minimum of 43 and a maximum of 48 staff positions.

U.S. Code specifies the Youth Challenge program will teach eight core educational components and that every graduate will attain 80% proficiency in each area. The eight core components are:

- 1) Academics (GED)
- 2) Leadership
- 3) Promoting fellowship
- 4) Service to community
- 5) Life coping skills
- 6) Job skills
- 7) Physical fitness
- 8) Health and hygiene.

MYCP works in conjunction with Jobs for Montana Graduates (JMG) to develop curriculum to meet the federal requirements of teaching the core components. Students are allowed to take the GED twice during the residential phase of the program. MYCP's goal is to achieve better than a 68% GED success rate. It achieves this goal with a current success rate of 71% of enrolled cadets and 97% of graduated cadets. *In most areas, MYCP either meets or exceeds educational targets.*

#### Recruitment

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Every six months, MYCP must identify a sufficient number of recruits to meet the class capacity of the Dillon facilities (100 cadets). The program maintains a year-round recruitment effort. All state programs follow similar procedures during recruitment, including the enforcement of standard eligibility requirements and use of Pre-Challenge to screen and select applicants.

#### MYCP Should Improve Documentation of Eligibility Review

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Applicants must meet ten eligibility requirements. Program staff initially reviews application forms to establish eligibility. Although MYCP generally ensures applicants meet eligibility requirements, our file review identified examples of applicants who did not appear to meet age requirements or the criminal conviction history was unclear. *The program needs to improve the documentation of eligibility decisions by ensuring documents used in support of an eligibility decision are retained.*

#### Representation of Montana's At-Risk Youth

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MYCP targets its recruitment efforts at the state's high school dropouts. To determine how well MYCP targets this population, we obtained data on the demographic characteristics of recruits and compared this to the characteristics of the state's at-risk population of dropouts and with Challenge programs in other states.

## **Gender and Racial Ethnicity of MYCP Recruits**

Females constitute 45 percent of all Montana high school dropouts, but only 25 percent of MYCP participants. The military-style environment at the program serves to attract more males than females. However, Montana's program does reasonably well in recruitment of females when compared with other states (19% national average).

Overall, there do not appear to be any significant problems in the representation of different ethnic groups in MYCP recruitment data. For the state's largest ethnic minority, American Indians, the program is recruiting numbers reflecting this groups' reported high school dropout rate.

## **Improve Analysis of Recruitment Data**

Around 2,000 students drop out of Montana's high schools every year, but MYCP does not use analysis of high school district dropout data to determine recruitment needs. Disparities exist in the geographic distribution of program applicants. ***The program could improve its recruitment effort by better targeting high school districts.***

## **Outcomes**

For those enrolled in the residential phase, around 72 percent complete the five-month course and graduate. The gradual loss of participants through the residential phase is referred to as the attrition rate. Analysis of ethnicity of program participants at different stages of Challenge showed one significant trend in attrition rates. American Indian cadets are more likely to leave or be dismissed as compared with other ethnic groups. Although 33 percent of program applicants are American Indians, this ethnic group constitutes only 22 percent of the graduating class. ***Obtaining and analyzing data relating to American Indian participants could identify areas for improvement.***

Challenge defines a positive program outcome as placing a graduate either in an educational program, full or part-time employment, working for a voluntary or charitable organization, or serving in the military. Review of available data identified the following trends in outcomes:

- Military Service – one fourth of graduates.
- Education and Employment – one half.
- No Placement or Unknown – one fourth.

We analyzed data from other state agencies to further verify the long-term impacts from MYCP participation. We obtained data showing quarterly wages and unemployment claims, and criminal conviction histories.

***There is a trend showing increased employment and earnings potential for graduates.*** On average, MYCP graduates earn around \$220 more per quarter when compared with rejected applicants, and twice as much as individuals who do not complete the residential phase.

We used Department of Justice data to determine if the program was successful in keeping at-risk youth out of the justice system. ***When compared with rejected applicants and cadets terminated during the residential phase, MYCP graduates are less likely to commit crimes.***

MYCP has encountered problems in collecting valid data on long-term outcomes and measures of success because contact with cadets cannot always be maintained beyond 12 months. Program staff indicated there are already attempts underway to obtain data on long-term outcomes for graduates. ***These efforts should be continued so the program can provide the department and the legislature with valid and reliable indicators of program outcomes.***

## **Background Checks of Mentors**

The 12-month post-residential phase is accomplished with the guidance of mentors. Mentors are chosen by the student and approved by MYCP. MYCP is required to perform a criminal history background check for all potential mentors. Review of program files indicated the majority of files sampled contained documentation that a background check and references were used in the screening process. However, 13 percent of files did not have this documentation. ***The department should ensure MYCP adequately documents all background checks.***

## **Legislative Guidance**

MYCP currently has no basis in Montana statute, aside from a biennial budgetary appropriation under House Bill 2 used to fund and manage the program. MYCP is not referenced in the Montana Code Annotated and the department has no statutory authority to adopt rules.

We identified several different administrative or operational areas where guidance from the legislature could benefit MYCP. Some examples include:

- Treatment of applicants with criminal convictions.
- Equitable representation of different genders, ethnic groups and locations in recruitment.
- Defining high school drop out status and coordinating services with schools.
- Establishing state residency requirements.
- Determining if MYCP should meet state educational accreditation standards.
- Coordinating programs and resources with other state programs for at-risk youth.

The program is now at the point where further legislative involvement could clarify existing policy and provide specific direction for the future. ***Establishing MYCP in Montana statute could benefit program operations and improve coordination of resources for at-risk youth.***

For a complete copy of the report (04P-14) or for further information contact the Legislative Audit Division at 406-444-3122; e-mail to [lad@mt.gov](mailto:lad@mt.gov); or check the web site at <http://leg.mt.gov/audit>.