



# Strengthening Families

## How a Kansas Assessment Center Diverted a Struggling Youth, While Bringing Together a Family in Need

February 2, 2022 | By Eric Borsuk

*Some names and identifying details in this story have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.*



### The Struggle

Paige was born with multiple health conditions, including severe hemophilia, a rare bleeding disorder in which the blood fails to clot properly, requiring infusions on a regular basis. Unfortunately, this meant she could not participate in activities with her classmates, like playing sports or attending school dances. Much of her childhood was spent in doctors' offices and hospitals. Because of her medical condition, Paige had difficulty fitting in and struggled to make friends in her small Kansas town.

Paige's mother, Lori, says that she and her husband, Mark, tried their best to make her feel like a normal kid. They never showed her extra attention because of her sickness, but instead treated her the same as their son, Paige's younger brother. The parents encouraged Paige to socialize with other kids from school.

According to Lori, everything was going well (all things considered) until 4th Grade. Paige had begun lying and acting out. Around the same time, Lori and Mark had purchased a cell phone for Paige, as a way of contacting her when she wasn't home, and also to communicate with friends.

The phone was only meant for calling and texting, not for social media. According to Lori, this is when everything changed. "I really thought I had a handle on it," Lori says, "but these days children are smarter than their parents when it comes to technology."

On multiple occasions, Lori caught Paige talking to strangers on the phone, as well as answering calls from unknown numbers, something that Paige had been specifically instructed not to do.

“**I really thought I had a handle on it.**”

Whenever Lori would check the phone, she found that the calls and text messages had already been deleted. Lori and Mark suspected that Paige was talking to strangers she had met online. On the flip side, Paige was much more engaged with her classmates. For the first time, she felt like one of the kids, something that had never happened before.

"She couldn't play sports like the other kids," Lori explains, "but she could have a cell phone like they did."

Because of her medical condition, Paige required home-nursing, and was often confined to the household. If she went anywhere, it had to be with a nurse by her side. Normally, she didn't have much freedom, but her cell phone offered a freedom that nobody could take away from her.

Unfortunately, the situation continued to worsen. Paige had grown erratic, regularly lashing out at her nurses and family members. Lori says that she no longer recognized her daughter, as if she were a completely different person. Paige did not like to be told "no," and if her parents grounded her, it seemed to have little effect. There was only one thing that really got to her.

"If you tried to take away her cell phone, it was like the end of the world," Lori says.

### The Arrest

In this way, it all came crashing down one day when Lori made a shocking discovery. It wasn't just the one cell phone that the parents needed to be worried about. Paige had been hiding multiple "burner" phones in her bedroom.

To Lori's horror, she found out that adult men had been mailing Paige, a 14-year-old girl, burner phones to their home address, so that she could send them nude photographs in return.

When Lori confiscated all the cell phones, Paige snapped, at one point brandishing a knife. Threatening to run away, she packed up her bags. When Paige tried to take the family dog with her, her brother intervened, at which point she struck him.

Unsure of what to do, Lori called 911 and explained the situation. She informed the responders that her daughter had severe hemophilia, and just touching her could cause serious bodily harm.

Later, when the police arrived, Lori watched in disbelief as officers handcuffed and placed Paige in the back of a squad car. Having never experienced anything like this before, Lori says that she was terrified and didn't know what was going to happen next. She was worried that authorities would try to take her daughter away from her.

## The Assessment

Around 7 p.m., law enforcement brought Paige to the Juvenile Intake and Assessment Services (JIAS) in Great Bend which provides immediate intervention for Child in Need of Care (CINC) and Juvenile Offender cases. Paige was met by an on-call staff member to start the Assessment Center process. With guidance from evidence-based screening and assessment tools,

Paige was interviewed by staff to gain her (the youth's) perspective and first-hand account about what was happening in her life to try to understand the root cause of her behavior.

In Paige's case, after some "verbal judo", as Ms. Woodmansee, Director of the 20th Judicial JIAC, calls it, they were able to quickly deescalate the situation between the youth and her parents.

The assessment tools concluded that Paige was a good student and she was not a user of any illegal substances—"very positive things," Ms. Woodmansee comments—but they would still need to get to the root of what was causing her problem. The goal was to help Paige work through her problems while also allowing her to stay at home with her family and out of the system.

By the end of Paige's assessment, the main root causes were determined to be a parent-child conflict, and Paige's lack of fitting in with her peers, in part due to the parents' practice of segregating their daughter because of her medical condition. JIAS's recommendations were for Paige to reconnect with her medical team, and for Lori and Mark to attend parenting classes to address the parent-child conflict.



**...we are not in the business of removing kids from their homes, unless there is a safety risk."**

Based on the established root causes, Paige's case was recommended for diversion, which is then sent to the County Attorney's office for review and determination.

"I think there is sometimes a misconception," Ms. Woodmansee says, but we are not in the business of removing kids from their homes, unless there is a safety risk."

## The Support

By 9:45 p.m., less than three hours after the initial intake process had started, Paige was released from JIAS to her family, having also agreed to the office's follow-up services in the coming days.



**I had to accept that I needed help"**

The next day, Paige and her family went to their clinic to see her usual counselor and medical team. Despite the four-hour drive, they normally made the trip once every week. During this session, Paige admitted to her counselor that she had recently gone "cold turkey" and stopped taking all of her medications at once. This is what had caused her erratic behavior and outbursts. To get her medications back on track, Paige was admitted to the hospital, and ended up spending three days in recovery.

As a parent, Lori admits that she was somewhat defensive at first. It was difficult for her to accept that she needed help in raising her child. She was afraid to let her guard down and didn't want to be viewed as a bad mother.



Lori says. "I thought that I could handle my daughter, but obviously I couldn't."

While at the Intake and Assessment Center, Lori had been offered to attend their "Parent Project" class.

Before the incident with Paige, and her interaction with the Intake and Assessment Center, Lori says that if someone had offered her the opportunity to take the parenting class back then, she probably would have looked at them like they were crazy.

Lori admits that the first class was a little intimidating, but once everyone started talking and opening up about their situations, she realized that everyone was there because they just wanted what was best for their child. Through the class curriculum, she learned different ways to talk to her daughter and assess her mindset. Lori felt that the class was an important step for her, and maybe what ultimately kept her daughter out of jail.

## The Progress

Since then, Lori says that the class has undoubtedly made her a better parent. As a daycare teacher, she has even used some of the teachings in her own work.

"They made me feel so comfortable and welcome," Lori says. "I never felt judged in any way. Once I realized that the Intake and Assessment Center workers were not bad people, and were not wanting to take my daughter away from me, things suddenly changed."

Since then, Lori says that the class has undoubtedly made her a better parent. As a daycare teacher, she has even used some of the teachings in her own work.

As for Paige, Lori says that while there have been some hiccups along the way, and they've had to adjust their safety plan a few times, overall it has been mostly positive steps moving forward. Lori thinks that the time Paige spent in the hospital was a wake-up call for her, and she started to recognize the damage that she was causing not only to herself, but also to her family.

Today, Paige is eighteen years old. She still attends therapy, but because of her steady progress, the sessions have been significantly reduced. According to Lori, every day is a work-in-progress, but Paige has made major strides since the beginning of her ordeal. She now attends school every single day, and even goes to evening college courses twice a week, while also holding down a part-time job.

Paige has been receiving exceptional grades in all of her classes. Lori says that she doesn't even have to force Paige to do her homework anymore. "In fact, Paige actually wants to do her homework!" Lori adds, smiling. "She is focused and motivated. To me, that's an amazing improvement."



**"Paige actually wants to do her homework! She is focused and motivated. To me that's an amazing improvement."**



The 20th Judicial District Juvenile Intake and Assessment Center Is a member of the National Assessment Center Association (NAC).

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



**They made me feel so comfortable and welcome."**

"They made me feel so comfortable and welcome," Lori says. "I never felt judged in any way. Once I realized that the Intake and Assessment Center workers were not bad people, and were not wanting to take my daughter away from me, things suddenly changed."

## More about the 20th Judicial JIAC and Kansas Juvenile Justice



The Juvenile Intake and Assessment Services (JIAS) in Great Bend, provides immediate intervention for Child in Need of Care (CINC) and Juvenile Offender cases, as well as provides emergency crisis counseling for youth and families, drug and alcohol screening, evidence-based classes, conflict resolution, and works to place first-time offenders in diversion programs to avoid justice system interactions. In this situation, Paige's case arose via a Child in Need of Care case, because she had threatened to run away from home, and also as an offender case through law enforcement, due to the fact that she had battered her brother.

Marissa Woodmansee is the Director of Juvenile Services for Kansas's 20th Judicial District. She has been with JIAS for 23 years, the last six of which she's been the Director. In this role, Ms. Woodmansee is tasked with running five core programs: Intake and Assessment, Diversion, Intensive Probation, Case Management, and Prevention. The Intake and Assessment Center, aligning with National Assessment Center Association (NAC) Framework, diverts and prevents young people from justice and child-welfare systems by implementing three core components: (1) to serve the community as a single point of contact for young people; (2) to identify the needs contributing to a behavior through evidence-based screening and assessment; and (3) to connect youth and families to community-based services and supports that address identified needs. The 20th Judicial Intake and Assessment Center is somewhat unique from others around the country in that it serves as a single point of contact for youth ranging from 0-23 years of age because of its role intervening for Children in Need of Care (CINC).

In Kansas's most recent juvenile services reform, Ms. Woodmansee explains, efforts had been made to prevent youth from escalating in the justice system, such as with intensive probation or even into correctional facility settings. Her district is large, covering five counties in total. Last year, 100 youth went through the Intake and Assessment Center, and thus were diverted from the justice system; the youth had a success rate of over 90%. However, Ms. Woodmansee is concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic will affect the data. She says it's difficult to engage kids when they are fearful of the pandemic, as well as the unknown. Still, Ms. Woodmansee feels that her district has adhered to the reform by working with this particular population up front, so that the higher-risk population is smaller, as was the intent of the reform, to make sure that the right youth are being served.

"That's the beauty of working in Kansas," Ms. Woodmansee explains. "Because we are state-funded and county-ran, the state allows us to morph those programs into what is going to work for us."

She says that her idea of success is simply put: to divert youth from the juvenile justice system. Ms. Woodmansee explains that the Intake and Assessment Center also offers walk-in services, and their intervention methods provide youth with the help they need, when they need it. Whether it's in the child welfare system or the offender system, Ms. Woodmansee says that she would ask herself the same question when evaluating a successful outcome: "Did we help that family in a time of need to prevent them from escalating in either system?"

The Centers makes recommendations for diversion which is then sent to the County Attorney's office for review and determination. Diversions are classified as either pre-file or post-file. In Paige's case, hers was considered pre-file, meaning that the only information about her case came from the law enforcement report and JIAS's intake report, with no official report in any court system, as opposed to a post-file diversion case. Generally, all first-time offenders are recommended for diversion. In the past, Ms. Woodmansee says that her office has recommended diversions two or even three times if the youth was cooperative but just needed extra support.

"At times it can be somewhat of a hand-holding process," Ms. Woodmansee, the Director of the JIAC, explains, "which also provides accountability and oversight. Sometimes we are just a safe place to have a conversation."

In addition to the intake and assessment process, the JIAC offers other supports like "The Parent Project." "We call it a 'parent support group,'" Ms. Woodmansee explains. It's a 10-week class with other parents that goes over a variety of topics. The curriculum is called 'Parenting Your Out-of-Control Teen.' We actually just started our tenth class a few weeks ago. I've sat in on almost every single class."

"The class that Lori attended was a really good one," Ms. Woodmansee says. "It felt like she had finally found the support that she needed. It takes away some of the shame and guilt for parents who are raising strong-willed kids." She explains that progress is gradual and sometimes parents need to be reminded that it's not necessarily about them, but rather what is in the best interest of the child.