1. Why did OYA miss its target for number of runaways?

This is difficult to answer. We agree that we have too many runaways, but it's also true that the number of youth running away each month varies significantly — since the first quarter of 2016, for example, it has varied between 65 and 104 youth per month. The variations follow no discernible pattern and are not associated with obvious explanations, such as the security level of programs youth run from; where youth are placed; or whether the weather is fair or inclement when they run.

CONTEXT
The Oregon juvenile code requires the justice system to keep youth in the least restrictive setting consistent with public safety, and OYA works hard to implement that directive. Placing youth in the community allows them maximum feasible access to opportunities for normative growth and skill development. (For example, it's easier for youth to remain sober in a locked facility than in a residential setting. But they will learn less about remaining sober if they are housed in a correctional facility than they will if they are placed in the community, where they must make real choices every day to remain sober.)

We expect that some youth will run away from placements. Residential care and foster care settings are not locked — we value the fact that these are voluntary treatment settings. And we're dealing with adolescent behavior, which can be impulsive, rash, and with little thought for consequences. As such, we will never be able to reduce the number of runaways to zero.

It is important to note that while there is no hard definition for what constitutes a "run", absence from a placement is usually reported very quickly. A youth may be gone for only a few minutes (e.g., the youth storms out of a foster home and there is concern for the youth's immediate safety) or as long as several hours (e.g., youth leaves for school and does not come home in the afternoon) before it is reported. Many youth return quickly and without incident, but not all do. Our challenge is to identify strategies to reduce the number of runaways and protect public safety without increasing their risk to recidivate by placing them too often or for too long in youth correctional facilities.

HOW WE PLAN TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE

- OYA recently developed a "Risk to Run" analytic tool, based on past data, that appears to be fairly accurate at predicting whether youth are high-risk to run away. We plan to implement this soon.

- A recent OYA workgroup that included researchers, field and facility staff, providers, and others focused on predicting youth runaway behavior and interventions. The work group developed a set of recommendations that included adoption of the "Risk to Run" tool. They also linked levels of risk to specific interventions designed to mitigate the risk of a youth running away. Their recommendations will take time to implement, but we believe they should reduce runaway rates.

- Moving forward, OYA's Research, Implementation and Operations committee will take a closer look at the data we have on runaway behavior. For example, data show that some youth run away for a short period; others are gone for much longer, and their behavior is more concerning. The committee will seek to draw conclusions that may suggest additional interventions or ways to target our efforts to prevent and reduce the runaway behavior that presents a greater risk to the community.