Bradley Hasbro Children’s Research Center receives $3.4M grant to study risk behaviors of juvenile offenders

PROVIDENCE – MARINA TOLOU-SHAMS, PHD, a psychologist from the Bradley Hasbro Children’s Research Center, has received a $3.4 million grant to study the behavioral health and associated risk factors of adolescent offenders in the Rhode Island Family Court system. The study, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, will focus on non-incarcerated, court-involved youth, and will monitor what risk behaviors the teens may develop, as well as the underlying causes.

The study will follow 400 Rhode Island Family Court-involved youth between the ages of 13 to 17, and their caregivers. Tolou-Shams’ team will monitor the development of drug use, HIV/STD risk behaviors, psychiatric symptoms and recidivism in the adolescent offender population in the two years after the initial arrest or court contact.

The likelihood of acquiring HIV/STDs is also substantially increased among court-involved youth. Studies of juvenile detainees with both substance use and psychiatric concerns show that most are sexually active and more than half have had multiple partners and unprotected sex.

“There has been an emphasis on moving away from juvenile confinement and instead developing prevention and treatment programs for juvenile offenders in the community. Yet, only a handful of studies have examined these behaviors among non-detained juvenile offenders, who represent 80 percent of all legally involved youth,” said Tolou-Shams.

Tolou-Shams, who is also director of the Rhode Island Family Court Mental Health Clinic, hopes that the findings from this study will help to develop recommendations on how the court system can better support first-time young offenders to keep more teens from repeating offenses.