

# With kids and crime, smart works much better than tough

By Sharon Weitzenhof

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COLUMBUS: Members of the Juvenile Justice Coalition are troubled by the state's "mixed bag" of results to improve Ohio's juvenile correctional facilities. In May 2008, the state Department of Youth Services (ODYS) settled a federal class-action lawsuit establishing that the confinement conditions at ODYS were unconstitutionally unsafe for youth. The settlement mandated specific steps be taken to provide a safer and more humane environment, and to work toward a regional, small-facility delivery system, as opposed to large institutions.

This "mixed bag" is a combination of significant efforts by the state and local jurisdictions, some real improvements, and continued distressing problems. Our concerns are based on our visits to the state's juvenile facilities and the federal court-appointed monitoring team's expert witness reports in the case.

While conditions vary by facility, children are isolated inappropriately and for long periods of time, facility violence is too high, mental health services are significantly lacking, and the youths' high suspension rates only further damage their inadequate education. ODYS has been implementing leadership, programmatic and training improvements, and we have observed some results, but everyone agrees there is much more to do.

In a recent visit to a facility, we talked to young people who seemed disengaged with the programming and questioned its impact. They talked about violence in the facility. One young man said he had been in the facility for six years, with another year to go — a result of mandated time for certain offenses. It is hard to imagine one of our children losing that much of his developmental years.

In another facility, the juveniles identified as "management problems" were required to wear physical restraints any time they were outside of their room. It is impossible to imagine this type of treatment having a positive impact on their development.

Research shows that we actually make delinquent kids worse by sending them to large facilities, which means these facilities are both costly and ineffective. Currently, Ohio spends a little more than \$300 per day (well over \$100,000 per year) to incarcerate a single young person, while an estimated 53 percent to 57 percent of youth released from ODYS facilities will reoffend.

Evidence-based alternatives, located in communities and using best practices, have proved to be more successful and less expensive than incarceration. Recognizing this, ODYS was supposed to develop a new system-wide plan, downsizing or closing existing facilities and reshaping the institutional "footprint" of the agency to incorporate a regional service-delivery model with a continuum of care.

Savings realized should be reinvested in proven, effective delinquency prevention and treatment programs, resulting in better outcomes for children and youth and more efficient use of taxpayer dollars.

ODYS and Ohio's juvenile justice system have made significant progress, particularly in reducing the number of youth confined in state facilities, closing three facilities, and by being part of a sweeping effort that seeks to create comprehensive and evidence-based programming in local communities. The result has been more targeted interventions with the highest risk youth and increased public safety.

Summit County is a glowing example of these positive changes, under the leadership of Juvenile Court Judge Linda Tucci Teodosio. However, the state is still struggling to develop the regional service-delivery model that the federal settlement calls for.

Ohio, like many states, finds itself having to remedy the costly mistake of creating a juvenile justice system that mirrors the adult criminal justice system. This tough-on-crime approach has proved ineffectual and even harmful to communities and youth, meaning that Ohio and other states have been sinking money into futile systems.

Ohio has started to take on the challenge of restoring its juvenile justice system to its philosophical underpinnings by building upon proven, evidence-based practices to treat youth in need. But much work remains to be done.

It is clear that reforming Ohio's juvenile justice system will both improve public safety and use scarce public dollars more efficiently and effectively — a goal more important now than ever. We will continue to advocate for changes that benefit both the youth in the system and society as a whole, such as the closure of large facilities, a focus on proven treatment programs and increased judicial discretion.

Society benefits when we get it right with these troubled youth. We avoid wasting tax dollars on ineffective services and we reduce the potential costs of future victimization and criminal behavior. When it comes to crime and kids, it's about time we went beyond "getting tough" and began to get smart.

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