

News



A program for juvenile delinquents monitors young people at home and provides family therapy. Tanya Simone from the Foundling Foster Care Agency is a program therapist. (Photo: Cindy Rodriguez)

Juvenile Justice: City Looks to Expand Use of Home Monitoring

[by Cindy Rodriguez](#)

NEW YORK, NY March 08, 2010 —Doing graffiti, fighting, stealing, or using drugs are among the offenses that can land a teenager in an upstate detention facility. But the facilities have come under fire by all levels of government, including the Department of Justice, which has threatened to take them over if serious reforms aren't put in place. The majority of the kids filling these juvenile prisons are from poor neighborhoods across the five boroughs, but the city wants to change that by expanding programs that both monitor and provide family therapy inside the home.

John Munoz, 15, lives in the Soundview Section of the Bronx. Last year, he was arrested for selling crack.

"I just did it out of nowhere. Everybody else is doing it, so while my father was working why not," John says. "I was always in the streets. I wanted to be cool."

It wasn't his first time getting in trouble. Prior to that, police had picked him up for allegedly carrying a machete and for trespassing.

"People do stuff like that to be cool, but it's really not cool 'cause when you locked up you cry, you be stressed out, you want your family back," John says.

John's not his real name. His family wants to remain anonymous. The juvenile delinquent spent six months in a detention facility for his crimes. Seeing her son arrested and detained has been hard on Stephanie Munoz. Her eyes well up with tears thinking about it. Her name has also been changed.

"As a mother I was dying," she says. "I don't even want to remember.... I never stopped visiting...praying to god that I would get him back."

Juvenile delinquents often have only moms, and in some cases no one that's willing to come forward and take responsibility for them. In many ways, John is lucky. He has two parents, willing and able to take part in a program aimed at keeping kids home instead of in state-run detention facilities. Last year, the programs served just over 300 kids. John Mattingly, Administration for Children's Services commissioner, wants to double that in four years.

"Surely we can do better than sending youngsters off to distant facilities that have very poor track records, from which they return quite often....more angry than they went in," Mattingly says.

Tanya Simone is the therapist for John's family. She visits twice a week. At first, it was more often. She says she knows the family pretty well.

"They just moved in a few weeks ago so they are still dealing with unpacking everything so it might be a little crazy," she says.

The apartment is crowded. Stephanie is in the kitchen cooking. Two of her sons are visiting from Albany. They brought their wives and kids along.

Simone is practical in her approach and gets from John the details of where he bought the pot, who sold it to him, and how he paid for it. She makes sure his mother's listening. The 15-year-old is lethargic and lays his head on the table off and on. The ninth-grader hasn't been to school for over a month. He says it's because kids fight too much and he's afraid of getting in trouble. The session with Simone lasts just under an hour.

Outside the apartment, Simone says John's complaints about school are common among kids in this program. That's because they all go to what are called District 75 schools, which handle the neediest special ed kids, including those that are emotionally disturbed.

"You have a school where you have, you know, juvenile delinquents grouped together, which we know is a bad idea, and so I absolutely do believe it is as chaotic as he is saying, and so our goal is to get him out of that school as soon as possible," Simone says.

While her son has continued to miss school, Munoz says he's still better than before, when she and her husband would have to scour the streets looking for him. Now, she says, he's home by 6 or 7. Plus, she says, he's calmer and doesn't fight with them like he used to.

"Tanya's program is good," Stephanie says. "The program of Tanya's has done something for us. For the whole family, because once you have a problem with your child, the whole family goes out of control....I was the type of person that would go out and walk alone and cry out my problems. But now that I'm taking pills, I have a psychiatrist, and I'm in therapy with Tanya, I don't do that anymore."

But Munoz still relies on Simone to help her control her son and that's something the program therapists discourage. They want parents to control their kids themselves, instead of relying on probation officers, school officials, or other government agencies. Bill Baccaglini, director of New York Foundling, a foster-care agency selected by the Administration for Children's Services to run this home-based program, says government interventions don't last forever.

"If you're on probation, you're only on probation for X amount of time. If you get incarcerated, you're incarcerated for a very brief amount of time and then the system walks away," he says.

Baccaglini says the cost per child for the program is \$50,000 a year, and that's for the most intensive services. According to a report by a governor-appointed task force, 1,600 youth enter state-run detention centers each year. The cost: \$210,000 per child. John Mattingly says the city should be saving money by sending fewer kids to these upstate facilities, but it's not.

"You can't win," he says. "You send less children, it doesn't cost you any less because they just simply increase the daily rate."

Since 1999, the city's cut its use of detention facilities by more than half, yet the bill's gone up by \$10 million. According to a state source, it costs the same to run a facility no matter how many empty beds there are and nothing will change until the state gets the okay to shut facilities down.

For John Munoz to remain out of an upstate detention center, he needs to stay out of trouble, especially for the next six months, when his visits to a probation officer end. He's not sure if he'll make it. He says he gets stopped and frisked by police several times a week, including two days ago while buying a sandwich at a deli.

"They asked me, like, 'Oh, what you doing?' I said I'm buying a sandwich, so he just threw me on the wall....What I could do? I just get searched and walk away."

Since 2007, the home-based program that John's in has served 316 families, and 65 percent of the kids graduated and stayed out of detention facilities, at least for the short term. But the program's true effectiveness will best be judged by a clinical trial that will track kids for three years to see who gets re-arrested. Detention centers have dismal recidivism rates: 75 percent of those kids are re-arrested three years after leaving.