

The Journal News (Westchester)

Reform of the state's juvenile justice system is long overdue

By Jeremy Kohomban • January 9, 2011

In his State of the State address, Gov. Andrew Cuomo forcefully demanded that New York stop the practice of sending teens to juvenile justice facilities located hundreds of miles from their homes.

As someone who has spent the greater part of his professional life working within the juvenile justice system, I found the governor's words to be not just a breath of fresh air, but also common sense.

The time for reforming the state's wasteful and ineffective juvenile justice system is long overdue. The average annual cost for keeping a teen in a limited-secure state facility is an outrageous \$272,000. The bigger outrage is what taxpayers are getting for this — 81 percent of teens who leave the state system are rearrested within three years. This is not surprising, since incarceration is known to be an educational process in which low-risk offenders are mentored by high-risk offenders. These low-risk youth then return to the community with the skills to commit crimes and a network of like-minded peers.

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers and no quick fixes, but we must begin now. There are those who claim that the children incarcerated in these distant facilities are all graffiti artists or turnstile jumpers. This, unfortunately, is a disingenuous oversimplification. The truth is that some have committed serious crimes, but that's only part of the story. About 30 percent of these children are in dire need of mental-health services. Most are children of color, and they come from our poorest neighborhoods, failing schools, and highly stressed family situations. They lack the appropriate role models crucial to a child's development. The current incredibly expensive out-of-sight, out-of-mind, "NIMBY" strategy of shipping them far away from family and community only to return hardened, broken, prone to further criminality and destined to long-term failure must change. It is time to be honest about the issue. We can hate the crime but love the child, and we should!

Throughout his address, Gov. Cuomo stressed his commitment to building on proven models. When it comes to juvenile justice, the formula for success is clear — we need local authority, and we must reinvest funds over the long-term in local solutions.

These local solutions will include a broad continuum of intensive and timely interventions for both teens and families. This continuum will include secure and non-secure detention, treatment, mentoring, family support, and it must include long-term follow-up to ensure that the interventions produce the desired results.

We begin by keeping teens close to their families. Families are a critical component to the rehabilitation process. Most often, the long-term solution only comes from within the family. Our interventions must support and empower families in their parenting responsibilities. When family is absent or unable to provide the structure and stability needed, we must be untiring in our efforts to create a family or a place of stability. At The Children's Village, in Dobbs Ferry, we repeat a simple mantra, "It only takes one appropriate, willing and capable adult to turn a life around." Yes, simple, but almost always true, and it is sad that so many don't have that one adult relationship that most of us take for granted every day.

Follow-up is critical. We must ensure public safety, and we must be certain that these teens are staying in school or entering the workforce. Being out of school and/or unemployed is a recipe for failure. At The Children's Village, where for every child served in our residential facilities we serve five in community, the results of our long-term follow-up are clear. Last year 86 percent of the teens discharged from our facilities with follow-up remained successfully in the community; 82 percent remained in school and 44 percent of those 17 years and older worked at least part-time. In Westchester, STEP, an intervention provided in partnership with the county Department of Social Services, served 243 teens since 2006, with 90 percent remaining arrest-free. Statewide, we provide Multi-Systemic Therapy, a national model with proven success in reducing recidivism. In MST, among the 896 families served, our re-arrest rate was only 11 percent.

These successes are not unique to The Children's Village. States such as California, Illinois, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Ohio have returned children, along with the funding to rehabilitate them, to local jurisdictions and have experienced similar successes. In Ohio, recidivism rates among teens dropped to 20 percent, compared to 53 percent in state detention facilities. And the counties saved \$11 to \$45 a day for every teen placed locally. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg recently suggested a similar realignment of juvenile justice services from the state to the counties. We can do this and the time is now.