

# Center for *Children's* Advocacy

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## TESTIMONY OF CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY IN SUPPORT OF RAISED BILL NO. 5837

This testimony is submitted on behalf of Martha Stone, Executive Director of the Center for Children's Advocacy. Martha is also Co-Chair of the Families with Service Needs (FWSN) Advisory Board and represented the plaintiff class of children in the case of Emily J., the lawsuit that improved the conditions of confinement for youth in the three juvenile detention centers and resulted in the development of community-based mental health programs for youth in the juvenile justice system.

We support Bill No. 5837 for the following three reasons:

First, the Juvenile Justice Consensus Group, convened by the former DCF Commissioner in response to Governor Rell's decision to rightly close CJTS, and consisting of 57 stakeholders including 5 state agencies, legislators, community providers, spent over a year studying the dilemma of what to do with the large-scale Juvenile Training School and what options were the most feasible. It was **unanimously** agreed that CJTS should be closed, for reasons relating, among others, to its size, location, and prison-like construction and that community alternative sites should be developed in its stead. . See "**Voice, Choice , Hope: Juvenile Justice Consensus Document** at <http://www.kidscounsel.org/Voice%20ChoiceHope2006.pdf> A change in policy made unilaterally by the Governor and new DCF Commissioner, without input from the previous Group or any of its stakeholders, has now resulted in an abrupt shift in direction. This shift, however, flies in the face of the carefully crafted Consensus Group's Report, issued in Jan., 2006, which was based upon the input of the many stakeholders in the community, and which recommended to close the facility over time, not increase its capacity.

Second, every jurisdiction around the country which has carefully examined its juvenile justice system and is implementing reforms, is not adding to its training school population, but, to the contrary, is decreasing its size, and in some cases eliminating training schools altogether in favor of smaller facilities that are still secure but based in the communities. See attached article. It is now uncontroverted, particularly given the success of the Missouri system, that breaking the populations down into community-based small centers has a direct correlation to a decrease in recidivism. Indeed, Missouri has abandoned their large prison-style "schools" for multiple community-based centers so parents of inner-city offenders can easily visit their children and participate in family therapy. It should be noted that Missouri's success is touted for a reason—its recidivism rate of 8% of those incarcerated coming back into juvenile custody and 8% going into Missouri's prisons is one of the lowest in the country.

Third, it is not cost effective to operate a CJTS facility for this population which will have 204 beds (if 16 and 17 year old population is included) at over \$280,000 a year per child. Smaller community-based alternatives can be found and operated for much less cost. One research study by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy has demonstrated that anger management, foster-care treatment and family group therapy cut recidivism drastically among teens, resulting in taxpayer savings up to \$78,000 per child.

Respectfully submitted,



Martha Stone, J.D.  
Executive Director



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Stateline.org

## **STATES ADOPT MISSOURI YOUTH JUSTICE**

By Christine Vestal, Stateline.org Staff Writer

It took a crisis, but the Show-Me State in the early 1980s abandoned its embattled youth corrections facility, which housed 650 juveniles, and switched to smaller regional treatment centers that provide education, job training and 24-hour counseling. Missouri's approach, originally pioneered in Massachusetts, aimed at creating a safe, non-punitive environment, where counselors help troubled kids turn around their lives.

Everything we did was guided by a central belief: These are kids, even though they've committed some very adult-like behaviors. Let's find out how they got into this, and help them get out of it and lead productive lives, said Tim Decker, director of Missouri's Division of Youth Services.

*K* The result of a scathing federal government report on the conditions and punishments in its juvenile lock-up, Missouri's radical new approach was some 20 years ahead of what is becoming a national trend. In the last three years, lawmakers and other officials from at least 30 states have visited the Missouri facilities, and several are taking steps to adopt the system.

States have begun to realize that if they can find effective methods of reforming youth offenders, they will save money, communities will be safer and kids will benefit, said Miriam Rollin of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, an anti-crime organization made up of attorneys general and other law enforcers.

Missouri's intensive counseling program is not necessarily cheaper than traditional lock-up programs, but with fewer than 8 percent of its graduates returning to the system, the state saves money in the long run, Decker said. You're not treating the same kids over and over, he said.

Experts say it's difficult to compare recidivism rates, because states use different methods to calculate the percentage of repeat offenders. But most states report double-digit rates, and some say more than half of kids who leave traditional facilities return within three years.

The success of the so-called Missouri model also can be measured by its participants' higher-than-average number of job placements and high education levels and the low incidence of violence at the facilities.

According to the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, there were 110 suicides in U.S. juvenile corrections facilities between 1995 and 1999. In Missouri, no suicides have occurred in juvenile treatment centers since their inception more than 25 years ago.

Looking to repeat those results are Louisiana, New Mexico, Santa Clara County, Calif., and the District of Columbia, which have been working with the Missouri Youth Services Institute, an organization formed by Mark Steward, the state's former youth services director.

Steward, who led Missouri's transformation for 18 years, retired three years ago only to be inundated by requests from other states looking for help. I was hoping for a little rest, Steward said, but the phone never stopped ringing.?

*f* Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, New York and Texas have had initial discussions with the Institute about using the program, but Steward says his small staff can work with only a few states at a time.

And he cautions them that a Missouri-style transformation won't happen overnight.

\* [ Under Steward's leadership, the state made slow, steady progress for more than two decades, resulting in a system that now includes 32 residential treatment centers located across Missouri in state parks, cottages, schools and college campuses.

\* [ Instead of razor wire, jail cells and prison guards, the cozy residential centers feature dorm-style bedrooms, classrooms and activity centers with comfortable couches and games. Most buildings are not locked, no one wears a uniform and staff psychologists, teachers and social workers are unarmed.

The program was fully supported at its onset by then-Gov. John Ashcroft (R), a tough law enforcer who later became U.S. Attorney General under President George W. Bush, and conservative state Supreme Court Justice Stephen N. Limbaugh, Jr., cousin of prominent right-wing radio commentator Rush Limbaugh.

Political opposition and loss of funding killed the program in Massachusetts, which was initially successful in the early 1970s.

National experts on juvenile crime urge states to invest in this type of counseling and rehabilitation, instead of confinement and punishment, as a way to stem adult crime and incarcerations. But for the last 20 years, most states have gone in the opposite direction, said Liz Ryan, director of the Campaign for Youth Justice.

A series of high-profile youth crimes in the mid-1980s spurred most states to adopt tough juvenile crime laws, which resulted in overcrowded corrections facilities, scandals over abusive and punitive treatment and corrections budgets that often surpassed the cost of public education, Ryan said.

Now, many states are loosening their harsh juvenile laws and looking for alternatives to their aging youth corrections facilities.

Louisiana, with its scandal-plagued juvenile corrections system, was the first state to launch a Missouri-style program in January 2005. But after Hurricane Katrina destroyed the state's juvenile corrections facilities in New Orleans, the system was in chaos and the program was put on a hold.

\* The District of Columbia was next to embrace the Missouri model and is now two years into a transition that Vincent Shiraldi, the district's Division of Youth Rehabilitation Services director, says will take at least another year to complete.

For the past two years, the Missouri Institute's Pili Robinson has worked five days a week with Oak Hill employees to transform the facility and train teachers and counselors in Missouri's methods. Without investing in major structural changes, the new center is achieving the kind of safe, warm atmosphere that Robinson says is essential to the success of Missouri's program.

Shiraldi, who battled complaints that he was soft on crime and powerful opposition by prison guard labor unions, is starting to see positive results.

We encountered internal resistance in the beginning, but that's starting to change, he said. Now we have tremendous political support, and the community is behind us.

Steward says the D.C. project, located at Oak Hill Youth Detention Center in Laurel, Md., was a

challenge. It was the most neglected system I'd ever seen in my life. The facility stunk, there were holes in the walls and ceilings where kids passed dope. They were just doing time. It was absolutely horrible, he said.

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You're telling the kids you care about them and want to help them, he said. They won't believe you if they're scared and uncomfortable.

Carl, 17, who has bi-polar disorder and struggles with anger management, has experienced both the old and the new Oak Hill. Locked up five times since he was 12 years old, he says this time is different. He's taken high school classes at the facility and hopes to get his graduate equivalency diploma before he leaves. For now, he's helping out in the program's administrative office.

During his earlier stays at Oak Hill, Carl said he and the other kids mostly hung out with nothing to do. Before, I just waited to see what would happen. Nothing was organized. I never knew what I was supposed to do to get out, he said.

Now with them giving me advice, I've grown and expanded. They help you understand your strengths and weaknesses, Carl said.