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## Harvard honors Missouri Division of Youth Services

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The "Missouri model," a compassionate approach to turning troublesome youths into productive citizens, has been drawing attention for years. On Tuesday evening, it scored its most significant honor.

Harvard University named the Division of Youth Services, with its emphasis on therapy rather than punishment, one of the nation's six most innovative government programs this year.

Since Harvard's Innovations in American Government Awards were launched in 1986, 187 programs have received the prestigious commendation, and some have become household names.

Consider the 311 phone line, aimed at making local governments more responsive to residents. Or Parents as Teachers, the only other Missouri statewide program ever to receive the nod from Harvard. All 50 states and eight foreign countries have adopted it. In part, Sue Stepleton, president and chief operating officer of the PAT National Center in St. Louis, credits momentum from the Harvard award in 1987.

She said it's "hard to overstate" the ripple effects of the honor and the "immediate credibility" it projects.

With the designation in its pocket, Missouri could lead a revolution in juvenile justice across the nation. That's the general idea behind the innovations awards — to spotlight programs that are way in front and then encourage other government bodies to adopt the proven and progressive approaches.

Already, officials from more than two dozen states have visited Missouri to take notes on its juvenile-justice system, which has been evolving for about 30 years. The District of Columbia is revamping its system in Missouri's image, and Louisiana and New Mexico have taken some initial steps toward doing the same.

Tim Decker, who directs the Division of Youth Services, said his department's unique approach "really begins with how you look at the issue of juvenile justice and juvenile offenders."

Although adolescents are referred to the division for what are considered crimes in the adult world, Decker said, "You have to move from seeing them as criminals to seeing them as young people who are a product of past experiences, who are a work in progress. You have to look at root causes."

That point of view, he said, "challenges your assumptions and brings you back to the fact that kids are immature, make bad decisions and might not have the skills they need to make their way through the world."

Missouri's system, which focuses on therapy rather than punishment, attempts to reform offending adolescents by housing them in small-group settings. Trained staff members help them understand what factors in their homes and neighborhoods might have helped lead them astray. The staffs help the youths to take responsibility for their choices and to forge a better way forward.

The recidivism rate speaks volumes.

About 9 percent of the youths in the system are re-incarcerated as juveniles or adults within 12 months of leaving the Division of Youth Services. In Florida and Kansas, for example, it's about 29 percent.

In addition, the juveniles in Missouri's system rack up high-school and GED credits and return to high school at unusually high rates.

Julie Boatwright Wilson is on the faculty at the John F. Kennedy School of Government and visited several of Missouri's juvenile facilities and interviewed many youths and employees as part of the competitive process. She was impressed by the trust that developed among the boys and by how deeply they thought about what had gotten them into trouble.

In one of many exercises in introspection, the boys make pictures of themselves, then list their temptations, their hurts and their fears. In groups of 10 or 12, they share their most personal details.

"There's this whole piece that is trying to get them to understand themselves," Wilson said. "Then (staff members) help them to control their anger or whatever."

The Annie E. Casey Innovations Award in Children and Family System Reform, as it's known, comes with a \$100,000 Casey foundation grant to spread the word about the division's approach.

"It's not a lot of money," Decker said, "so we're going to have to look for tipping points, key places where we can invest dollars that will lead to a transformation of the juvenile-justice system nationally. We will work with the innovations staff at Harvard to plan that."

He said his office already is working to get the word out. A book, in the final editing stages, details how other states can set up a system similar to the Missouri model.

In addition, as is done every year, documentaries will be made of the Missouri program and the other five government programs receiving the Harvard honors. They will be hosted by actor Sam Waterston and broadcast by the Public Broadcasting Service.

The Harvard awards, Decker said, demonstrate "that innovation can and does occur in state government, and that state government can be highly effective."

Even with the kudos, he's not about to sit still. Decker said the Division of Youth Services continues to experiment in an effort to refine its approach.

"We know we're not there yet," he said. "You never are in this kind of work — not until every one of these young people turns into a law-abiding and productive citizen."

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