

FRIDAY, MARCH 07, 2008

States adopt Missouri youth justice model

By Christine Vestal, Stateline.org Staff Writer

As states grapple with spiraling prison costs and reports of abuse in juvenile lock-ups, many are trying to recreate a successful Missouri program that boasts one of the lowest repeat-offender rates in the country.

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 a 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.

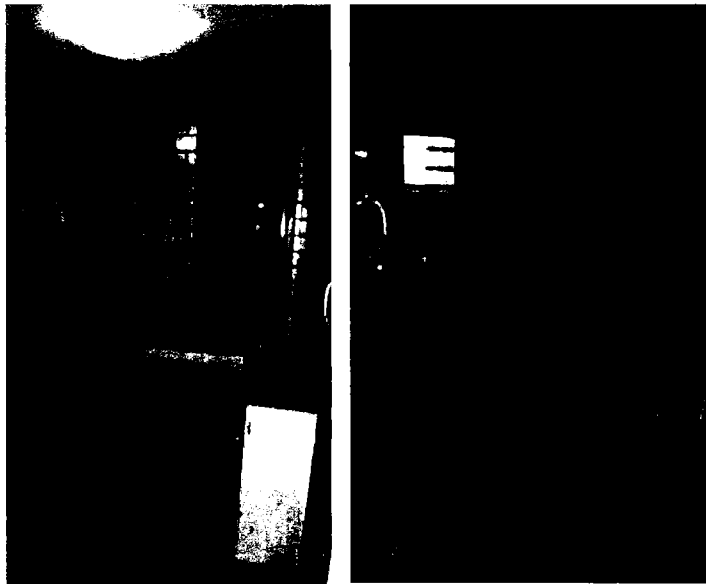
The result of a scathing federal government report on the conditions and punishments in its juvenile lock-up, Missouri's radical new approach was some 20 years ahead of what is becoming a national trend. In the last three years, lawmakers and other officials from at least 30 states have visited the Missouri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



Photos by Christine Vestal, Stateline.org
Oak Hill Youth Detention Center, before and after. On left, original cell in un-renovated section. On right, cell converted to Missouri-style bedroom.

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."

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.