

## Louisiana Reforms Its Juvenile Justice System

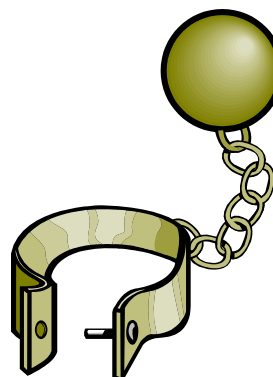
Through a resolution offered by Representative Mitch Landrieu of New Orleans, the Louisiana Juvenile Justice Commission (Commission) was created during the 2001 Regular Legislative Session to design a comprehensive vision for the juvenile justice system. In authorizing this resolution, the Legislature asked the Commission to study, among other things, the availability and quality of secure detention facilities and services. As a result, the Commission was formed of legislators and community leaders to examine and make recommendations to reform and restructure the state's juvenile justice system. The six senators, six representatives, and forty-four members of the Advisory Board who make up the Commission began to develop strategies to strengthen the role of families and the community in seeking alternatives to institutional confinement and out-of-home placements

To assist in reaching its goals, the Commission worked closely with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. The Foundation's Strategic Consulting Group provided support to the Commission free of charge and assisted the Commission in making a number of recommendations based on the direction provided by the Legislature.

One of the recommendations made by the Commission during the 2003 Regular Legislative Session was to close one secure juvenile facility. As support for its position, the Commission noted that recent statistics demonstrate that over 70% of the children in secure juvenile facilities were charged with non-violent crimes. The Commission recognized that this recommendation would not include the wholesale release of all children housed in the facility, but would establish smaller, residential or nonresidential placements within local communities to treat the children deemed appropriate to release from secure care.

The 2003 Legislature responded by passing HB 2018 which included a provision to close the Swanson Correctional Center for Youth—Madison Parish Unit as a facility for juveniles by December 31, 2004 with a possible 5 month extension to May 31, 2005. A comprehensive plan for transitioning juveniles out of the facility based on the health, safety, and best interests of each child and the public safety is also required before August 1, 2003.

## Incarceration to Treatment Using Best Practices



The Commission believes that the time is right for Louisiana to move away from strict incarceration for non-violent juvenile offenders and restructure its program model based instead on the needs of the children. Many other states have implemented “best practice” models using community-based service providers to design treatment plans that meet the needs of children and protect the public. A number of these best practice programs have been designed for both children in the juvenile justice system as well as children at-risk of entering the system. Utilizing these types of “best practice” programs, states can advance two purposes simultaneously—ensure that treatment plans meet the needs of the children to assist in their rehabilitation and



protect the public by maintaining secure facilities in circumstances when warranted.

Best practice programs designed to meet the state's goals include the following criteria:

- ✓ Pre-planning for program implementation
- ✓ Ensuring programs are research based
- ✓ Matching interventions with specific needs
- ✓ Responding quickly to needs
- ✓ Being of appropriate duration
- ✓ Drawing on strengths of children and their families
- ✓ Being delivered by trained professionals who believe in the intervention
- ✓ Being evaluated by referral sources on a regular basis

While the state has a stake in assisting children through rehabilitation programs, the children must also understand the consequences of their actions, accept responsibility for what they have done, and be given an opportunity to make restitution with the victim of their actions in appropriate circumstances.

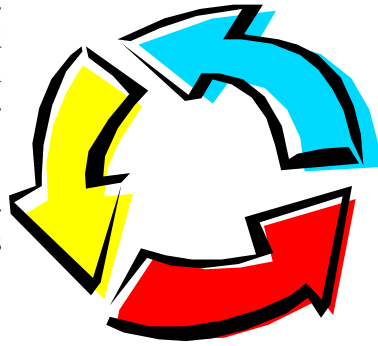
“Best practice” programs designed to promote the responsibility of children address this by:

- ◇ Holding children accountable
- ◇ Providing opportunities to build positive competencies
- ◇ Recognizing victims
- ◇ Providing aftercare and reintegration
- ◇ Building community support

While the focus in Louisiana has been on the incarceration of juveniles, other “best practice” programs address those factors that put children and families at-risk of criminal behavior by using an integrated approach.

Research in this area suggests that a number of predictive factors lead to a pathway towards delinquency which must be addressed in a comprehensive way:

- ▶ Substance abuse
- ▶ Sexual abuse
- ▶ Developmental disabilities
- ▶ Mental illness
- ▶ Family dysfunction
- ▶ Academic failure
- ▶ Truancy
- ▶ Socio-economic factors



In making these recommendations, the Commission is attempting to move away from the traditional incarceration model to alternative methods that have been successful in other states. The recommendation to move from incarceration to community-based treatment is the first step in moving towards achieving the goals of the state to help children in vulnerable populations while protecting the public.

### Material for this newsletter was derived from the following sources:

Blueprint Project funded by federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and managed by the University of Colorado's Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (most stringent and use designator of Best Practice Program)  
American Youth Policy Forum's *LESS HYPE, MORE HELP: Reducing Juvenile Crime, What Works-and What Doesn't*

*Guiding Principles for Promising Female Programming: An Inventory of Best Practices*—another project of OJJDP

U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services (2001). *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General*

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Louisiana State University  
School of Social Work  
Office of Social Service Research and Development  
311 Huey P. Long Field House  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803

