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# JUSTICE JOURNAL

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## From the Executive Director

As I write this, Connecticut's Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the Court Support Services Division (CSSD) of the Judicial Branch are taking steps to develop a comprehensive juvenile justice plan. This plan, facilitated by the Child Welfare League of America, will outline the state's overall juvenile justice philosophy and improve coordination of the various components of the system. Hopefully, the development of this plan will also begin to answer some tough questions about the young people who find themselves in the juvenile justice system and whether this system is the best way to meet their needs and change their behavior.

In 1989, 8,145 young people were referred to Connecticut's Superior Court for Juvenile Matters. By the year 2003, that number had risen to 14,612 youth – an increase of 79%. While the number of juveniles referred to court every year continues to increase, juvenile arrest rates have been decreasing steadily across Connecticut. The Total Crimes Index for Connecticut's most populous counties has decreased dramatically since 1994 – down 35% in Hartford County, 38% in New Haven County and 49% in Fairfield County.

Connecticut must account for this dramatic increase in court referrals in the face of decreasing crime. Do all of these youth really need court intervention or are there more effective ways to address their needs in their communities? The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance contends that community-based programs, outside of the court's purview, are often better able to meet the needs of the child and his or her family.

New CSSD initiatives are showing promise as effective interventions for keeping certain young people from progressing further into the juvenile justice system. Case Review Teams,



for example, bring together a variety of stakeholders to look over the cases of those children the state plans to send to residential placement to determine if an appropriate alternative can be found. While the program is in its early stages, it has already diverted from residential placement nearly half of the children's cases it has reviewed (42%). CSSD also collaborated with the DCF to create the new Family With Service Needs protocol in an attempt to keep status offenders from progressing further into the court system.

This issue of Justice Journal highlights juvenile review boards as one diversion alternative preventing certain kids from entering the juvenile justice system. Good diversion programs ensure accountability while keeping the focus on rehabilitation. Diversion programs share one basic idea with CTJJA – only the kids who truly belong in the juvenile justice system should be there.

Fernando J. Muñiz



## Juvenile Review Boards

Juvenile Review Boards (JRBs) bring police and community-serving organizations together to provide meaningful alternatives to the juvenile justice system for young people who have committed minor criminal or status offenses (running away, truancy, shoplifting, etc.). JRBs in Connecticut have proven to be both effective and efficient in dealing with young, first-time offenders.

Bob Petrucelli, director of the East Haven Youth Service Bureau and a member of the East Haven JRB, explains that the value of the JRB comes from its community-based, individualized nature. “JRBs allow communities to deal with the issues facing youth on a local level,” he notes. Instead of sending a kid to a regional juvenile court facility, the JRBs bring together members of the young person’s own community – his family, teachers, coaches, etc. – to determine what the consequences of the juvenile’s actions

will be and what actions can be taken to prevent further issues from arising in the future.” Detective James Polomsky, youth officer with the Simsbury police department, agrees that the community-based nature of JRBs is a real benefit. “Since the leaders of the child’s own community sit on the JRB, the experience of appearing in front of people they recognize as leaders can have a stronger, more personal impact than appearing in front of an unknown judge in a New Britain courtroom.”

Without JRBs, more young people end up in the juvenile court system with a delinquent record and no guarantee that their punishment will keep them within their community. In contrast to the traditional court system’s one-size-fits-all approach to service delivery, JRBs handle each case in a way that is specifically designed to meet the needs of that situation, youth and family.

Petrucelli also highlights the police/community collaboration as one of the major benefits of JRBs. “In communities with JRBs, police officers are seen in a proactive, positive light as they work with

youth, their families and community organizations like the Youth Service Bureau (YSB) to prevent the child from having to go to court.” Joel Rosenberg and Fran Carino, from the Andover, Hebron and Marlborough JRB (AHMJRB), agree that the JRB program successfully combines the efforts of family members, law enforcement, the court system, YSBs and school systems. Rosenberg and Carino feel that their JRB follows a “firm but fair process” through which children are held accountable for their actions within their immediate community.

So how exactly do JRBs work? JRBs are locally administered and do not answer to any state agency. As a result, no two JRBs are exactly the same. While all JRBs have their own procedures, the process typically begins when a police officer who is handling a youth case talks to the child and his or her parents or guardians. If all parties agree, and the

youth admits guilt, the officer may refer the case to the JRB. Individuals who serve on a JRB tend to include police officers, court representatives, educators, school resource officers, private social workers, YSB representatives and other community members. This group discusses the facts of the case, sometimes with the youth and family present, sometimes without. According to Simsbury JRB chairwoman, Mickey Lecours-Beck, their JRB tries to get both parents to come in with their child as a way to emphasize the seriousness of the process to everyone involved. “Our JRB grills both the parents and the youth during the meeting,” she says. Possible diversion options available to the AHMJRB, which are typical, include the youth making restitution, probation supervised by the JRB, community service, an apology to the victim, family counseling, drug testing, research projects, drug and alcohol counseling/treatment and linkages to positive youth development services. The young people and their families are also made to understand that violating the conditions set during the JRB will result in a date in juvenile court.

**“Since the leaders of the child’s own community sit on the JRB, the experience of appearing in front of people they recognize as leaders can have a stronger, more personal impact than appearing in front of an unknown judge in a New Britain courtroom.”**

**—Detective James Polomsky**



The Simsbury JRB, which has been operating since 1982, provides a good example of the youth who come through the program, the offenses they commit and the consequences they receive. According to Charlotte Barth, who maintains all of the records for the Simsbury JRB, typical offenses that bring youth to the JRB include shoplifting and possession of less than four ounces of marijuana or drug paraphernalia.

In all Simsbury cases, the young offender will have to complete community service hours. Depending on the circumstances, a youth may have to finish as few as ten, or as many as 50 hours. Barth sets up these community service assignments, and does whatever she can to connect the consequence to the action. For example, one young man who had broken into a school and vandalized lockers was assigned community service in a different school, where he cleaned desks and performed other maintenance tasks.

While JRBs are focused on preventing the young person from going further into the juvenile justice system, there is a strong emphasis on accountability. The Simsbury and AHM JRBs have been successful in maintaining accountability and keeping the child from re-offending. Lecours-Beck says, “The vast majority of the young people we deal with are good kids who made a bad decision. We want the JRB experience to impress upon them the seriousness of their actions and the fact that bad decisions lead to consequences.” Their methods seem to work, as Lecours-Beck estimates that 90 to 95 percent of the young people who come through the Simsbury JRB do not commit a second offense.

Polomsky agrees with Lecours-Beck about the kinds of kids that come before the JRB and the need for both accountability and rehabilitation. “Kids make mistakes. That is one of the principles our JRB is based on. We try to get these young people to understand why what they did was wrong, the fact that their bad decision created consequences that affected other people and that they don’t want to make that same decision again.” Polomsky

believes that one of the major benefits of the JRB is that it gives these young people a second chance. “Instead of going to juvenile court, where they not only end up with a criminal record, but also sometimes leave thinking, ‘Hey, maybe I’m just a bad kid,’ in the JRB environment we can emphasize that a bad decision was made and that this mistake doesn’t have to follow them forever. They can accept the consequences of their bad decision, learn their lesson and then put the experience behind them.”

According to the Andover, Hebron, Marlborough JRB, the young people who participate in their diversion programs have reported positive changes in behavior at school and home, improved self-esteem, better grades and an ongoing connection to community-based mental health services. The families of these youth were also able to build on the support systems established for their children with the confidential support of the JRB.

Communities with JRBs have found them to be successful diversion tools as well as cost-effective.

For example, none of the JRBs mentioned in this article include the JRB as a separate line item in the budget. Besides office supplies, phone calls and mailings, the costs of the JRB are minimal. Petrucelli explains, “Everything [for the JRB] is in-kind – from staff time to attend meetings to doing the minutes to coordinating community services.”

The JRB model of diversion and prevention is effective and efficient in the Connecticut communities where it exists. Catholic Family Services in Hartford recently received funding from the Department of Children and Families and the Court Support Services Division to begin a JRB. This program may signal the greater acceptance of JRBs in the state’s urban areas. Expanding the number of JRBs in Connecticut would allow the state to provide more young people with an inexpensive detention alternative that has been proven to work.

**“The vast majority of the young people we deal with are good kids who made a bad decision. We want the JRB experience to impress upon them the seriousness of their actions and the fact that bad decisions lead to consequences.”**

**— Mickey Lecours-Beck**





## Bridgeport Detention Center

One of the goals of the Alliance for 2005 is to prevent the construction of the Bridgeport juvenile detention center. The state recently hired the Child Welfare League of America to develop a joint juvenile justice plan, working with the Department of Children and Families and the Court Support Services Division. This plan will outline the state's overall philosophy and vision for juvenile justice. The Alliance feels that building a new detention facility outside of that plan is short-sighted.

There is also no evidence that the state needs an additional 88-bed facility. The current Bridgeport facility can house 25 young people, but rarely does. In the past year, there have been as few as eight children in that detention center. Even accounting for possible overflow from the Waterbury or New Haven court systems, there are not enough children to justify those new beds.

Juvenile crime, which has declined in each of the

last seven years, is at its lowest level since 1988. In fact, juvenile crime in Fairfield County has decreased 49 percent since 1994. This trend does not support the building of a facility which will increase Bridgeport's detention bed capacity 252 percent.

Beyond these arguments, all of the current research about juvenile justice confirms that large detention facilities do not serve the needs of young people, and frequently enhance and encourage misbehavior. Smaller, community-based programs have been found to be both more effective in meeting the needs of the youth and much less expensive than large detention centers.

The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance recognizes that the current juvenile court and detention buildings in Bridgeport need to be replaced. Instead of a large detention facility, the Alliance supports the construction of a smaller facility with fewer secure detention beds and expanded community-based services.

### ACTION ALERT

CONNECTICUT JUVENILE JUSTICE ALLIANCE

#### STOP THE EXPANSION OF THE BRIDGEPORT JUVENILE DETENTION CENTER

Volume I November 2004

**Bridgeport Does Not Need an 88-Bed Juvenile Jail.**

**The Numbers Speak for Themselves:**

**State's Proposed Increase in Detention Beds in Bridgeport:**

**↑ 252%**

**Juvenile Crime in Fairfield County Since 1994:**

**↓ 49%**

**Is an 88-bed Juvenile Jail the Best Plan for Bridgeport's Young People?**

The state of Connecticut is set to build a new Bridgeport juvenile court and detention center -- at a cost of over \$50 million. While there is no doubt that Bridgeport needs new facilities to replace its outdated juvenile courthouse and detention center, the current plan would add unnecessary beds at the expense of other much-needed services.

Now, Bridgeport's detention center has a capacity for 25 youth. In the past year, it has housed as few as 8 youth. Juvenile crime, which has declined in each of the last 7 years, is now at its lowest level since 1988. This trend does not support the building of a facility which will increase capacity by 252%.

**A Better Investment for our Youth:**

The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance supports the construction of a smaller facility with fewer secure detention beds and expanded community-based services, which are significantly less expensive than detention.

**CALL OR WRITE THE GOVERNOR AND TELL HER WE DON'T NEED 88 DETENTION BEDS IN BRIDGEPORT!!!**

Honorable M. Jodi Rell  
Office of the Governor  
State Capitol  
210 Capitol Avenue  
Hartford, Connecticut 06106  
(800) 406-1527

Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance • 2470 Fairfield Ave • Bridgeport, CT 06605  
(203) 579-2727, ext. 307 • FAX (203) 333-9118 • [www.ctjja.org](http://www.ctjja.org)

Download this document from the CTJJA website at [www.ctjja.org/resource\\_14.html](http://www.ctjja.org/resource_14.html).

## Call for Family Involvement

One focus of CTJJA for 2005 will be to increase the level of parent and family involvement in our advocacy efforts. We are working to identify families affected by the juvenile justice system who are willing to participate in writing letters to legislators, speaking at public forums and using their experiences to educate and help others. One thing we know about families affected by juvenile justice is that they have a tendency to be the same families who are affected by educational and/or mental health issues. CTJJA is planning to collaborate with local and state-wide parent groups to develop a database of willing family advocates and provide the kinds of training and support services these families need to be effective advocates. If you know a family that might want to join in these efforts, please contact Abby at 203-579-2727 or [abby@ctjja.org](mailto:abby@ctjja.org).



## Juvenile Justice Alliance Youth Committee

The Juvenile Justice Alliance Youth Committee was formed to ensure voices of youth are heard by the community and the government. The Youth Committee will spend its first year focusing on creating a strong group in Bridgeport under the direction of CTJJA public ally, Tyricee Fuller, and will expand to other communities in the future. The youth that attended the first meeting on October 27 come from unique backgrounds and experiences, representing both alternative and traditional high schools. There were several youth that spent more than 30 minutes on the bus to attend the meeting.



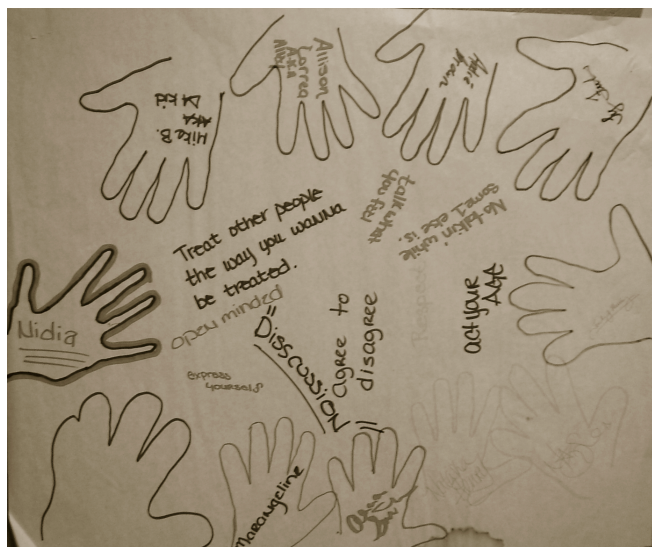
**Members of CTJJA's Youth Committee discuss what they can do to improve Connecticut's juvenile justice system.**

The goal of the Youth Committee is to create awareness among young people about the policies and systems that affect them, provide them with positive after-school alternatives and teach them how to be advocates for themselves and the issues they care about.

The founding Youth Committee members came together openly and honestly and formed quick friendships. They came up with numerous ideas about prevention and re-entry programs that would effectively support young people. As a group, they were excited to join the Youth Committee so that they could have an opportunity to do something productive, enhance their college resumes and

speak out on a topic important to them. They were excited about the chance to have their voices heard and some of them were especially anxious to speak on behalf of their friends who'd become involved in the juvenile justice system.

Among their ideas about things that would help them and their peers to avoid trouble and remain motivated included job opportunities for young people, more after-school activities and better pay for teachers so that they would be more motivated to help their students. One of the students remarked, "If I was paid like these teachers are paid to do what they have to do, I'd just sit around and let kids do whatever they wanted as well." Several other students remarked, "We need jobs." These young people aren't "slackers," and they aren't apathetic. They understand the underlying factors leading to the challenges facing them. What's inspiring is the fact that they are willing to step up and be active participants in figuring out solutions.



**Members of the Youth Committee developed rules and goals for the group during their first meeting.**





## The Face of Juvenile Justice

Fifteen-year-old Ashlee, from Ansonia, Connecticut, made a series of bad decisions when she was 13. Two years later, she is just coming off of probation. Ashlee's road into the juvenile justice system and the lesson she learned are not uncommon.

A couple of years ago, Ashlee was skipping school and acting out at home. "I didn't want to go to school with the teachers on my back and the security guards always looking at you." A Families with Service Needs petition was filed by the school and Ashlee and her family went to court. One afternoon, while her Families with Service Needs case was being processed, Ashlee and a friend went to the mall. There, as Ashlee put it, "We just made a greedy, spur-of-the-moment, bad decision." Between the two of them, Ashlee and her friend shoplifted more than \$400 worth of make-up, clothes and jewelry from various stores. "It started with taking one little thing. We saw how easy that was and just kind of got caught up in the whole thing." When they tried to take something from Filene's, they were caught.

Mall security took Ashlee and her friend to a small holding cell right outside of the mall. About three hours later the police came. The girls were searched for any additional stolen materials by a female cop, handcuffed, put in the back seat of a police car and driven to the station. Once there, Ashlee and her friend were released from the handcuffs, fingerprint-

ed, photographed and put in their own, separate cells until their parents came to pick them up.

Ashlee estimates that she went to court about five times. Finally, she was sentenced to 24 months of probation and told that any mistakes during that time period could mean that she would be placed in a detention center and/or taken away from her parents' custody. The terms of Ashlee's probation included a 9 p.m. curfew, drug tests every six to eight weeks, monthly meetings with her probation officer, going to school, behaving at home, weekly counseling sessions and spot checks by her probation officer to ensure that Ashlee was following all of these rules.

Overall, Ashlee found the counseling to be the most helpful element of her probation, saying that her family relationships have improved and that she's developed some anger management skills that prevent her from acting out at school and yelling at teachers. "I mean, everybody makes mistakes sometimes, so I'm not perfect, but I'm pretty good now."

Ashlee's probation has just ended and she says that she has learned her lesson. "It's easier to go to school and try to get along with people than it is to deal with all that probation stuff." Ashlee's advice to other young people? "Be choosy about your friends and careful about whom you hang out with. Most important, don't do things that are illegal."

### Research Finds

The Girls & Violence Task Force, convened by the Governor's Prevention Partnership released its report, *Preventing Girls' Aggression and Violence*, on October 15, 2004. This report provides background about girls and violence, discussion of the pathways to violence that effect young women and strategies to prevent violence in the lives of girls. It concludes with recommendations to "end the oppression, abuse and victimization of girls so that they can feel safe in their homes, schools, community and society." The report can be downloaded at [www.preventionworksct.org](http://www.preventionworksct.org).

Recently, the OJJDP released a Model Programs Guide. This guide serves as a terrific source of information about programs to address the entire spectrum of juvenile justice issues, from prevention to re-entry. One of the most useful features is the ability to search the guide database for sample programs in any area of interest. The Model Programs Guide is located at [http://www.dsgonline.com/mpg\\_non\\_flash/mpg\\_index.htm](http://www.dsgonline.com/mpg_non_flash/mpg_index.htm).

On December 21, 2004, Lieutenant Governor Kevin Sullivan and the Connecticut Mental Health Cabinet released their final report, including a series of comprehensive proposals designed to significantly improve Connecticut's failing system of mental health care. Some of these proposals will positively affect youth at risk for juvenile justice involvement. To read the Connecticut Mental Health Cabinet report, visit [http://www.ct.gov/ltgovksullivan/lib/ltgovksullivan/Connecticut\\_Mental\\_HealthKBS2\\_-\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ct.gov/ltgovksullivan/lib/ltgovksullivan/Connecticut_Mental_HealthKBS2_-_FINAL.pdf)



## Website Re-Launch

The CTJJA website is at the same address, [www.ctjaa.org](http://www.ctjaa.org), but it's a whole new site. The new website allows visitors to sign up to receive monthly e-newsletters and enter keywords that signify their main juvenile justice issue area – from girls' services to mental health. When a new item that includes that keyword is posted to the site, an e-mail will be sent alerting the individual that new information is available. "With the new site up and running we expect to be the clearing house of juvenile justice-related research for the entire state of Connecticut. Everyone interested in juvenile justice, from state employees to legislators and from involved families to students can use our site to find the data they need," says CTJJA executive director, Fernando Muniz.

