

Youth Today

October 1, 2008

Mighty Missouri Model Honored by Harvard; Now What?

By: John Kelly

There is no shortage of testimonials from the juvenile justice field when it comes to the confinement strategies used by the state of Missouri.

Under Department of Social Services Director Gary Stangler and Mark Steward, who ran that department's Division of Youth Services (DYS) for 17 years, the system has moved toward small, scattered secure facilities with programs that focus on treatment and education.

Now, the accolades have been tossed from that ivy-est of towers: Harvard University, specifically, the Kennedy School's Ash Institute. The Missouri Division of Youth Services was one of six Innovations in American Government award winners, an honor that comes with \$100,000 from the award's sponsor, the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation.

So -- is it time to let the Missouri revolution begin?

Alas, it is not a program that works for every youth, especially those with serious mental health needs or severe educational limitations. And it is not a panacea for the parts of the system that work with the majority of juvenile offenders who do not need commitment.

Getting Results

When it comes to working with confined juveniles, Missouri's results seem indisputable. At no time over the past 10 years has the percentage of youth returning to state lockup within two years of discharge exceeded 9 percent. In 2002 it was 6 percent; last year, 7 percent.

For a comparison that reflects how much other states struggle with this, consider New York, where Gov. David Paterson (D) is putting together a juvenile justice task force to deal with reform, because the state estimates that 80 percent of youth released from its custody are returning to state custody shortly after release.

"As far as a statewide system, there is no question Missouri is head and shoulders above everyone," says Marc Schindler, general counsel for Washington, D.C.'s Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services. The agency has used Missouri's program model for youth at its Oak Hill Academy, a residential facility in Laurel, Md. Toward that end, it has worked closely with Missouri Youth Services Institute, the consulting group set up by Steward after he left the state's DHS in 2005.

But Washington's system is one of only four in the country that are working with Steward to replicate the Missouri model. The others are Louisiana, New Mexico and Santa Clara County, Calif. (which is more populous than many states).

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Others are interested, but Steward is picky about whom MYSI will work with. He cites two reasons: He has limited resources (the JEHT Foundation, based in New York, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation are the big contributors to MYSI projects), and he doesn't want places touting Missouri's approaches unless they actually mean to use them.

"He's turned places down," Schindler says. "Which is to his credit; Mark is not just going to work with anybody."

Steward estimates that at least half the states sent delegations to Missouri for visits during his tenure at DYS. "A significant portion would come in, see [our system], and either say 'That looks too hard to do' or were not committed to changing the work," he says.

He doesn't blame them. "You are talking about totally redoing staff and management practices. You'll have to fight unions and some line staff."

Even with Steward's stringent acceptance rate, one of the four MYSI projects is in a precarious state. Louisiana moved toward a Missouri model before Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, but progress stalled after the storm, because many facilities lost a lot of staffers.

Louisiana's move toward the Missouri model also appears to have slowed because of the departure of Gov. Kathleen Blanco (D), who aggressively recruited MYSI and Casey's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, and talked the MacArthur Foundation into making Louisiana one of the four states in its Models for Change initiative. Gov. Bobby Jindal (R) took office this year and brought in new juvenile justice leadership in Richard Thompson, who came in with no support from the youth work community and resigned five months later. Jindal's administration says it still intends to move toward the Missouri model, and has contacted Steward to ask MYSI to return as a consultant.

"I think one of the most critical elements [in replicating Missouri], if not the most, is consistent leadership," says Schindler, whose boss, Vinny Schiraldi, has led Washington's juvenile justice system for 3½ years – a lifetime in that city.

"In the time Missouri had one director [Steward], D.C. had about 20," Schindler says. "I don't think there's any way we are talking about Missouri having accomplished this" if it had incurred the standard turnover in leadership.

It will be interesting to see if the Harvard recognition will help sell other states on emulating Missouri's approach. In Connecticut, Gov. Jodi Rell (R) fully supports a Missouri model system. But state legislators – many of whom remember being pushed by Rell's predecessor, Gov. John Rowland (R), into approving bonds for the extremely punitive Connecticut Juvenile Training School – have refused to approve money to build the three small facilities needed for such a reform.

More to Come?

It's easy to understand why legislators would be gun-shy about an expensive makeover after that debacle. Will the Harvard stamp of approval help sell Missouri's system in Connecticut or elsewhere?

There is now \$100,000 more to help make it happen. Missouri DYS spokesman Brian Hauswirth says the money from Harvard will be used to help other states import the system. That could mean staffing a coordinator, flying state officials in for visits, or just giving the money to MYSI.

Steward, by nature a jovial and positive person, isn't sure the model will proliferate without a bigger culture change in juvenile justice philosophy. "The culture in a lot of places is still very correctional," he says. "They just don't want to treat these kids that well."