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The Florida Times-Union

July 20, 2008

Juvenile system struggles with gender divide

By Charlie Patton,
The Times-Union

For Maria, a 17-year-old from Jacksonville, the road to juvenile detention began at age 10.

That's when she confessed to lewd and lascivious behavior with her younger cousins, a confession she told juvenile justice expert LaWanda Ravoira was to protect her emotionally troubled older brother.

Maria said she received no psychological counseling as her case made its way through the juvenile justice system. Gradually, upset and alienated that no one asked or even seemed to care if she was innocent, she grew defiant, she told Ravoira, who shared her notes from the interview with the Times-Union on the condition the girl not be identified.

A string of arrests, mostly for fighting, climaxed with Maria joining some friends who stole a car and committed a robbery. That crime eventually sent her to a detention facility in Florida's Panhandle.

On any given day in Florida, there are 1,000 girls like Maria locked up in some residential facility or detention center, said Ravoira, who is interviewing girls from Duval County for a two-year study.

With that statistic comes a paradox. Most girls in the juvenile justice system are far less likely to pose serious public safety risks than boys, but they are far more likely than boys to be committed to residential programs for misdemeanors or violations of probation.

A 2006 study by the state's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability found 44 percent of the girls committed to residential facilities the previous year had committed felonies, compared with 63 percent of the boys. The report also found that Duval County was the state's leader that year in committing girls who were not felons, having sent 61 into residential programs.

For girls, the juvenile justice system has become "a default repository for low-risk but high-need children," according to the annual Kids Count Data Book released this month by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The problem, Ravoira said, is that judges are trying to get girls out of bad family situations or off the streets and into treatment. Since there aren't a lot of community programs aimed at emotionally troubled girls, judges send them to residential programs.

But in a system that was designed for boys and badly retrofitted for girls, those residential programs aren't set up to provide treatment, especially the "gender-specific" treatment girls need, said Ravoira.

"Girls have been an afterthought, squeezed into programs that are designed for males," she said.

Addressing the gender divide

The State Attorney's Office has a program called Focus on Females through which 600 to 700 girls a year are diverted, said Shelley Grant, the office's director of youth offender programs. The girls, most of whom spend three months in the program, get counseling, meet with older girls who have been through the system and "talk about gender-specific issues," Grant said.

While Focus on Females is a "good beginning," Ravoira said, many of the girls need in-depth therapeutic services that the program isn't designed to provide.

One program that is often cited as a model for a community-based approach to at-risk girls is the PACE Center for Girls.

The PACE program, which was started in Jacksonville in 1983 and now has more than 15 centers across the state, provides education, counseling and training to its girls, said Mary Marx, PACE's vice president for external affairs.

Lisa Steely, the juvenile coordinator for the Public Defender's Office in Jacksonville, said that if she could wave a magic wand and remake the juvenile justice system, "I would send them all to the PACE program. It works."

Studies found that of the girls who go through the PACE program, 89 percent stay free of the juvenile justice system for at least a year, Marx said.

But Jacksonville's PACE Center only has space for about 90 girls at a time and each girl usually spends 12 to 18 months in the program, Marx said. As a result, there is usually a two- to four-month-long waiting list, said Lynn Bertram, executive director of the Jacksonville program.

Ravoira, who spent almost 14 years as president of PACE, left in 2005 to become an advocate for changing the way Florida's juvenile justice system deals with girls. She served as one of three authors of A Rallying Cry for Change, a National Council on Crime and Delinquency report on the treatment of girls in Florida's juvenile justice system.

Treatment vs. incarceration

The report, published in 2006, found that most girls who ended up in residential facilities suffered from significant emotional and psychological problems that weren't being addressed. About 64 percent reported having been physically or sexually abused, 49 percent reported attempts at self-mutilation and 34 percent reported suicide attempts, the report said.

Ravoira also served as author of the Children's Campaign's Justice for Girls Blueprint for Action report, funded by The Florida Bar which found it would cost the state less to create effective community-based programs for girls than it costs to send them to residential facilities.

A report from the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability found that residential commitment carries an annual cost of from \$21,000 to \$50,000 per girl while community programs range in costs from about \$8,000 to \$16,000.

Now Ravoira, with funding with the Women's Giving Alliance of Jacksonville and from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, is studying what happens to girls from Duval County who end up in the juvenile justice system.

One key goal, she said, is to find out at what point someone might have intervened and changed the lives of girls like Maria.

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