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Center's site for research targets Jacksonville

By Charlie Patton

The oldest criminal justice research organization in America is announcing today that it is opening a new center in Jacksonville to focus on improving treatment of girls in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.

The new National Center for Girls and Young Woman, which will be initially funded with a \$500,000 grant from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, will be headed by Jacksonville resident Lawanda Ravoira, a national expert on the treatment of girls in the juvenile justice system.

Barry Krisberg, president of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, which has a \$10 million annual budget and about 75 employees in Oakland, Calif., and Madison, Wis., said he has wanted to open the new center for at least a decade. "We need a voice for girls and young women," he said.

Ravoira served for almost 14 years as state president of the PACE Center for Girls, an alternative school program with 15 centers. She left PACE in 2005 and was co-author of A Rallying Cry for Change, a comprehensive study of girls in the juvenile justice system.

That report, published in 2006, found that girls are incarcerated for misdemeanors and status offenses, such as truancy, running away and violating curfew, far more often than boys. It also found most girls who end up in residential detention facilities suffer significant emotional and psychological problems that aren't being addressed. In most cases, they found that what were described as "girls' programs" were "boys' programs painted pink," Krisberg said.

Ravoira, who is now studying what happens to girls from Duval County who end up in the juvenile justice system, said she plans to have the center open and staffed by January. In the meantime, the new center gets its official launch at a dinner tonight at the Epping Forest Yacht Club. The National Council on Crime and Delinquency's board of directors is in Jacksonville for a meeting.



Among the people Ravoira has asked to speak at the dinner is Jasmine Bowman, a 17-year-old Jacksonville resident who has been in the juvenile justice system. Bowman, who will complete high school in December, said she used to be "a problem child." Unable to concentrate in school, upset about constant arguing at her home, she kept getting into fights at school. About two years ago, she was referred to the Jacksonville's PACE Center.

Before PACE, "I felt like there was no help, no love," she said. Now she's planning to enroll in Florida Community College at Jacksonville and become an investigator. She called the new center, with its focus on girls, "a very good idea."

Ravoira said she hopes to change the system so more girls get the gender-specific help they need to turn around their lives like Bowman. Advocacy and research will definitely be among the new center's core services, she said. But the center will also generate income and create change by providing evaluation and training to government agencies that are dealing with lawsuits or accusations of gender bias, Krisberg said.

"We've got many states and counties calling us in to help them fix things," he said. "Our focus will be a national focus."