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– Q&A: Lawanda Ravoira, National Center for Girls and Young Women

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The National Center on Crime and Delinquency has begun work on a major new project: The **National Center for Girls and Young Women**, which will be based in Jacksonville, Fla., and funded with a \$500,000 start-up grant from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund.

The new venture will be run by Lawanda Ravoira, who will need no introduction to JJ professionals in the center's home state. She recently served as vice chairwoman of Florida's Blueprint Commission on Juvenile Justice, and served for 14 years as CEO of the PACE Center for Girls, which serves 4,500 at-risk Florida girls each year.

The center couldn't come at a better time. It is entirely possible that, should Congress reauthorize the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act next year, judges might not have the option of **sending status offenders to any secure facility** by 2012.

That would significantly affect what judges do with girls, who are committed to such facilities for status offenses with **far greater frequency** than are their male counterparts. Translation: it's time to develop and proliferate some services tailored to girls.

We e-mailed Ravoira for some of her thoughts on the state of girls in juvenile justice.

JJ Today: You hear and read a lot that girls are the "fastest-growing" population in juvenile justice; the phrase "girls represent the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice population" gets 32 hits on Google. Do you believe that is still true today, or has the growth in the percentage of juveniles who are female subsided?

Ravoira: Girls are the fastest growing juvenile justice population. The national picture shows that crime rates are decreasing for both girls and boys, but the rate of decrease has been slower for girls. Nationally, since 1997, there has been an 18 percent decrease for boys who are incarcerated compared to only an 8 percent decrease for girls. However, there are 14 states where the female juvenile rate of incarceration has increased more than 30 percent since 1997.

JJ Today: In announcing the center, NCCD President Barry Krisberg said that many girls' programs "were boys' programs painted pink." What are the fundamental differences in how you reach female offenders?

Ravoira: What must first be understood about girls is the pathways that lead girls and young women into the justice system. To successfully reach girls, we must address the victimization and past trauma that often results in a girl's involvement in the justice system. Girls can be especially vulnerable and misunderstood due to the effects of past trauma and emotional factors (e.g., depression, anger, self-destructive behaviors and mental health/clinical diagnosis) that contribute to delinquent behavior. Girls can present with extreme mood swings that include being withdrawn, aggressive or even assaultive. Some girls internalize their pain while others act out and display intense feelings and destructive behaviors that result in involvement in criminal activity.

JJ Today: Give us some examples of projects, research you guys want to take on at the National Center for Girls and Young Women. Do you see the center becoming the authoritative voice on females in juvenile justice, or simply serving a supportive role?

Ravoira: The center will be the leading voice for girls in the justice system and for those girls who are caught in the justice and the child welfare systems. Our work will be grounded in advocacy that promotes systemic change and that is driven by the needs of girls and young women.

JJ Today: Are there any programs, counties, states that really "get" how to take girls in the system and successfully keep them from coming back?

Ravoira: This is an excellent question. At this time we are looking to find the state or even a local jurisdiction that is investing in girls and young women.

JJ Today: You've operated out of Florida for a long time. Gov. Crist put the blue ribbon commission on juvenile justice together, which you were a part of. But he only put \$4.6 million towards your recommendations, right? Were you disappointed with the follow-through there, and what are your thoughts so far on new [state] JJ leader Frank Peterman?

Ravoira: I am not only disappointed, I am compelled to continue to speak out and challenge our elected officials to be courageous and invest in all of Florida's children - and particularly address the gender inequity in the treatment of girls and young women. Secretary Peterman has reached out to the National Center for Girls and Young Women and we are currently developing a gender responsive training program for the department.

JJ Today: What are the most frequent tell-tale signs for you that a girl is seriously headed toward a chronically-violent future, as opposed to a girl who may have done something that is likely to be a one-time thing?

Ravoira: It is imperative that when looking at the needs of girls, that we recognize it is the trauma that drives girls behaviors, and too often our system focuses on the behavior and the trauma that is the core issue is forgotten. Or worse we re-traumatize girls when they come into the system. When a girl does not have a network of supports, it is more likely that she will spiral into a situation that leads to unsafe living conditions. Without the support network (or programs and services that can provide the supports that any girl needs), it is more likely that she will end up getting deeper into trouble as a result of a lifestyle that is based on survival (living on the streets, needing to make money for food, shelter; etc.).

***JJ Today:* It's well-known that judges tend to detain and commit girls for things they probably shouldn't: 14 percent of ALL females 20 and under who were detained/committed/diverted to a juvenile residential facility on census day in 2006 were status offenders, as opposed to 4 percent of all guys.**

But many judges will tell you they do that out of fear for a girl's safety in many cases. If those options are phased out (as has been proposed in the Senate version of the JJDPA reauthorization), what do you think those judges will do (and what should they do) when status-offending girls come before them?

Ravoira: First, we must address the gender inequity that exists in the justice system specific to this attitude that we will protect girls by detaining them. The result is not protection at all - it is an issue of inequitable treatment. The decision to detain should be based on the level of the public safety threat. Girls who commit status offenses can be better served in the community - in gender responsive community based programs and services.

When girls come before a judge for status offenses, the judge should work with the public defender and other professionals to refer her to the appropriate community-based programs. When these programs are not available, we should not punish girls for the lack of services. And I would ask - given that the same situation does not happen to boys - what do they do when boys commit status offenses? The response is not to commit them to locked facilities.

***JJ Today:* Given the high percentage of female offenders who have experienced physical or emotional abuse, do you think mental health screening should pretty much be automatic with girls at intake ... or that counseling should automatically be part of the disposition?**

Ravoira: It is imperative that girls be assessed automatically with a gender responsive and culturally specific assessment tool. The assessment tool should be done as soon as she enters the system and recommendations should be driven by the needs of the girls balanced with the public safety risk.

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