

Justice for Girls: Unfinished Work

Submitted by Lawanda Ravoira & Vanessa Patino

NCCD to open the National Center for Girls in Jacksonville, Florida

Tamela's Story

“Tell adults to be there for us. Be what our parents couldn't be. Be somebody we didn't have, Be a friend. Kids have no one to really talk to. That's where you can start to help us. Whether a girl is good or bad – be there to help.. I have no one. And I really try to be good but I always mess up....I need to hear that someone like me can make it.”

Tamela, 17 years old

Hair that needs care, dark circles under her eyes, a few blemishes on her face, Tamela is a petite African-American living in a one-room cell behind razor-wire in a juvenile lock up facility. Her dad left when she was seven. No one ever talked about it when he left home. The sexual abuse started at age four. By age seven she was shuffled from relatives to foster home placements. She started “*smoking weed*” at age 12. Weed lead to cocaine to prescription drugs to crack. By age 12, she was “*doing a lot of drugs and running away from home*”. By age 13 she was arrested for trespassing, runaway, shoplifting and prostitution. She needed money to “*pay people*” for a place to stay. She has been in and out juvenile lock up since age 13.

Too many girls in the nation's juvenile justice system are suffering in silence, unseen, and often forgotten. Like Tamela, their stories are heartbreaking. Not only are

their lives tragic before they are committed to a juvenile justice lock-up facility, the situation is compounded by the conditions in the institutions.

Tamela's story is similar to the stories of thousands of girls throughout the United States caught up in the juvenile justice and foster care systems. They are entering the juvenile justice and dependency systems through many pathways, few of which are addressed effectively. The pathways begin early, problems intensify and young girls who could have their lives turned around wind up bouncing between foster home placements or when they cross over in the juvenile justice system are locked up in facilities that are ill-equipped to meet their physical, emotional and mental health needs.

Although juvenile crime rates overall are declining, more adolescent girls are arrested and incarcerated than ever before. Girls account for 26% of the total juvenile arrest nationally. The juvenile justice system has long been ill equipped to meet the gender-specific needs of girls. Despite research and evidence documenting the urgent need for gender responsive policies, programs and services, girls have been considered a low priority and historically are often inappropriately placed in programs and services designed for boys and at best retro-fitted for girls.

Jessie Ball duPont Fund Provides Grant to Establish the National Center for Girls

To address this critical need, the Jessie Ball duPont Fund has made a 2 year grant to help the NCCD establish the National Center for Girls in Jacksonville, Florida.

To spearhead this effort, Dr. Lawanda Ravoira joined NCCD July 1, 2008.

Scheduled to open in October, 2008 in Jacksonville, Florida., the National Center is an expansion of current NCCD services and programs to address juvenile justice and child welfare systems that are designed for boys and ill equipped to meet the

gender-specific needs of girls. In partnership with Children’s Campaign, Inc., the National Center for Girls will lead reform efforts in Florida as well as nationally.

Responding to the growing population of girls who are incarcerated, the National Center will address the multiple issues that contribute to fast tracking girls into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. The Center will offer training, technical assistance, and dissemination of research-based knowledge to agencies, jurisdictions, and service providers. The goal is to build a national movement aimed at reducing the numbers of girls entering or penetrating the system and improving their outcomes.

Innovation

NCCD research tells us that professionals at all levels are frequently frustrated with the lack of information and training in best practices for girls. Emotional and behavioral challenges of girls have been difficult to translate into programming for frontline staff. The Center’s training and assessment model will be the first of its kind, an innovative approach that focuses on improving staff competency and programming environments. It is easy to prescribe “what should be done” but “how” to do that effectively in practice is often overlooked or neglected. The Center will offer training and technical assistance that takes into account appropriate gender-responsive programming and further illuminates how these can be accomplished with different girls, taking into account their motivations, culture, strengths and needs.

Center Activities

The Center will provide the following core services:

- **Evidence-based, Gender-specific Assessment Services** developed by NCCD that address the motivations driving girls’ behaviors.

- **Staff Training and Development Workshops and Conferences** that provide protocols for gender-responsive intervention strategies. Training curriculums will address the unique needs of administrators, judges, public defenders, foster care, and direct service staff.
- **Virtual Learning Opportunities** that include a series of innovative online training courses.
- **Networking with Colleges, Universities, and Law Schools** aimed at identifying and developing partnerships to engage and equip the next generation of juvenile justice and child welfare administrators and staff who will work with girls.
- **Dissemination of Research** that ensures agencies stay up to date with best practices.
- **Evaluation Services** to examine qualitative and quantitative outcome measures of programs using gender-responsive approaches.
- **Consultation** on gender-responsive program design and implementation.

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