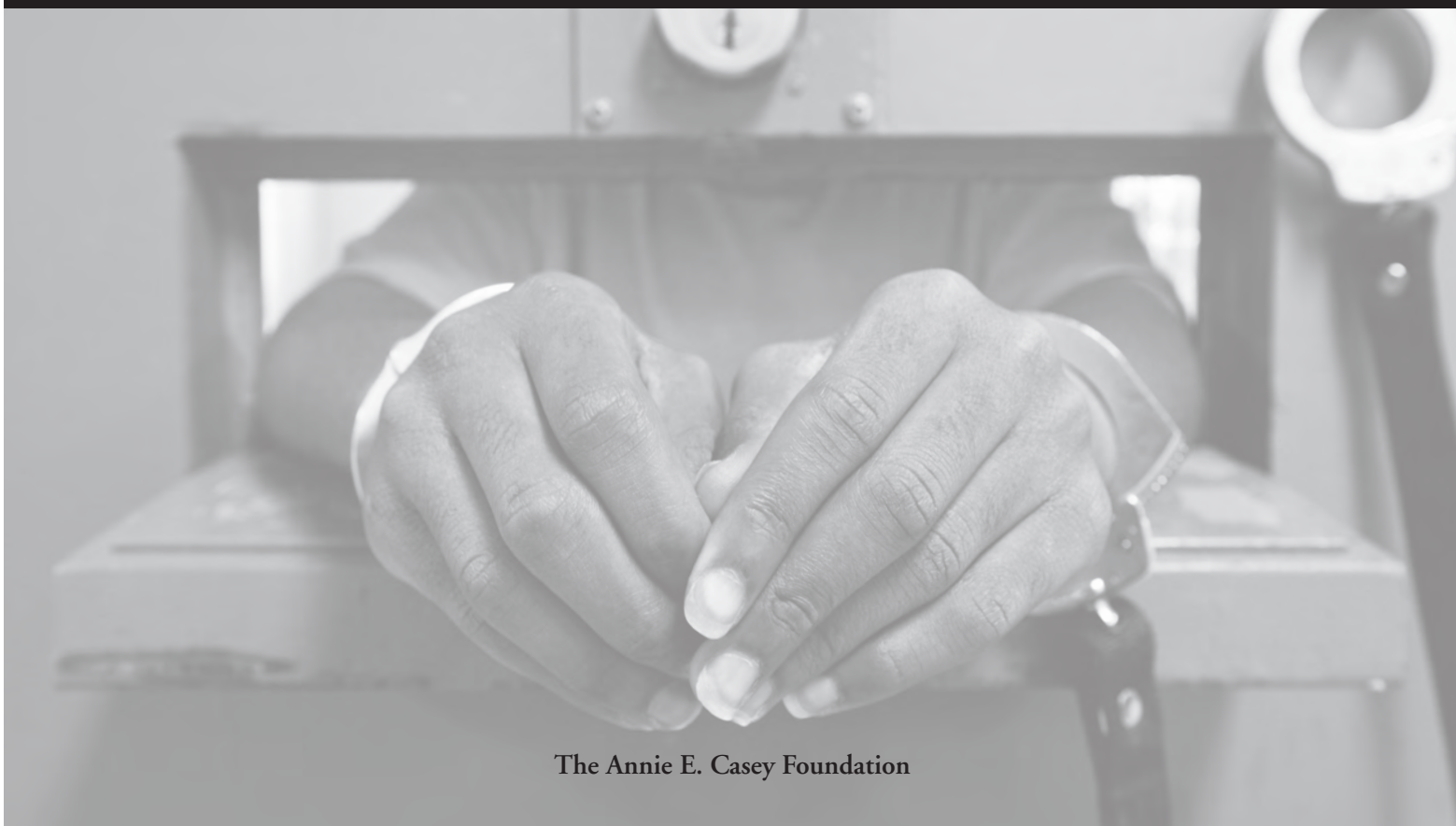




## The Missouri Model

Reinventing the Practice of Rehabilitating Youthful Offenders



The Annie E. Casey Foundation

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of UPS, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs.

For more information and to download copies of the summary and full report, visit the Foundation's website at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

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## Preface

The Annie E. Casey Foundation believes that this country's continuing reliance on large youth corrections facilities—whether they are called training schools, reformatories, or youth development centers—has been expensive, ineffective, and all too often abusive. Youth correctional facilities are routinely found to be unsafe, unhealthy, and unconstitutional, underscoring the need for dramatic changes in how these places are staffed, programmed, and organized.

Even where conditions in training schools meet basic standards of decent care, the outcomes of incarceration have been disappointing, if not dismal, both in terms of recidivism and youths' future success. In state after state, 70 to 80 percent of juveniles released from youth corrections facilities are rearrested within two or three years for a new offense. Pitifully few of these youth return to complete high school, and their long-term success in the labor market is severely jeopardized.

Abusive conditions that produce poor public safety and youth development outcomes are bad enough, but the price tag for these results makes them still harder to accept. Nationally, we are spending almost \$6 billion annually on youth corrections and, in many states, the average cost per bed, per year exceeds \$200,000. At these prices, taxpayers and policymakers alike should be clamoring for excellence in youth corrections. Instead, we seem to have settled for disastrous outcomes and abusive living conditions that we'd never accept if those confined were our own children.

Missouri's approach offers a promising alternative. Since Missouri closed its training schools nearly 30 years ago, its youth corrections agency has consistently produced better outcomes than other states without breaking the state's budget. It has done so by offering a far more humane, constructive, and positive approach:

- eschewing large institutions in favor of smaller group homes, camps, and treatment facilities;
- maintaining safety through relationships and eyes-on supervision rather than isolation and correctional hardware; and
- providing intensive youth development offered by dedicated youth development specialists rather than correctional supervision by guards.

Missouri's excellent results, described in detail in this guide, speak for themselves. They produce far lower recidivism than other states, an impressive safety record, and positive youth outcomes—all at a modest budget far smaller than that of many states with less-enviable outcomes.

The Missouri approach overcomes one of the key challenges facing our nation's juvenile justice systems. Thanks to the vision of its leaders, and to the dedication of its frontline staff, Missouri has

created an excellent model for how states can effectively supervise and treat the small number of youthful offenders whose criminal behavior poses a significant threat to public safety.

But, for Missouri and virtually every other state, other key challenges persist. If we want youth corrections to be smaller and more effective, we need to be better at diversion, probation, and alternatives to incarceration. We need to narrow the pipeline of youth entering the system. We must eliminate inappropriate or unnecessary reliance on secure (pretrial) detention, the gateway to the system's deep end. And we especially need more diverse and effective interventions in the community for the vast majority of delinquent youth who do not require or deserve confinement in corrections facilities. Few in Missouri would argue its success on all these fronts, especially the key issue of establishing a rich continuum of effective alternatives to incarceration for youth who break the law and display serious behavior problems, but don't pose a major public safety risk.

All of Casey's work with troubled youth—and most of the available research—indicates that youth are best served through interventions that, whenever possible, keep them at home and provide targeted and evidence-based supports to help the young people and their families succeed. A growing body of evidence shows that these home-based interventions work far better than incarceration. Thus far, no state, Missouri included, has invested proportionately to create a full-scale network of such programs, and there is reason to fear that when a state's institutional care is well regarded, many juvenile justice officials might commit youth to correctional custody who could be better served at home.

Sadly, there will probably always remain a cohort of delinquent youth whose behavior demands correctional supervision. And for those youth, there is no better system than Missouri's. We offer this guidebook in hopes that it will inspire leaders in other states to embrace a new vision for juvenile corrections based upon Missouri-style reforms.

For years, Missouri's approach has been widely cited and often praised—but seldom replicated. We hope that will change in the near future, and that this publication will help build the momentum for this long-overdue reform movement.

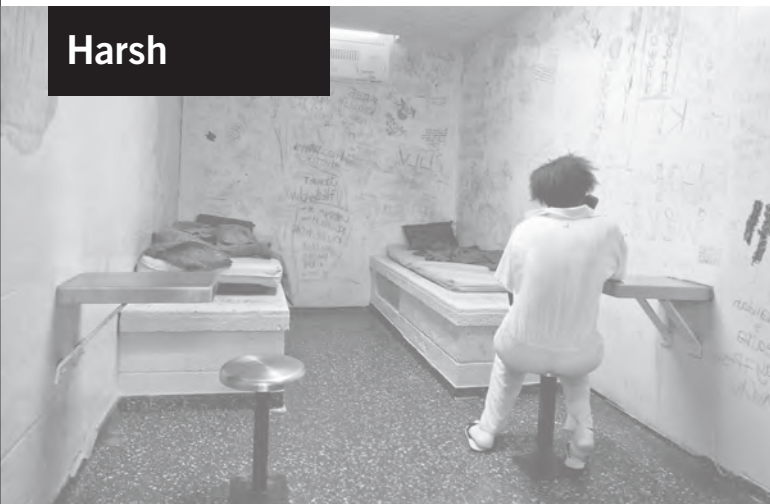
Patrick T. McCarthy  
President and CEO  
The Annie E. Casey Foundation



## A Better Approach to Juvenile Corrections



**Humane**



**Harsh**

A sea change is on the horizon in juvenile corrections. For more than a century, the predominant model for the treatment, punishment, and rehabilitation of serious youthful offenders has been static: confinement in a large, congregate-care correctional facility. While the labels assigned to these institutions have changed periodically over the years—reform school, training school, youth corrections facility—the institutions themselves have changed little. In most states, these institutions still house the bulk of all incarcerated youth and still consume the lion’s share of taxpayer spending on juvenile justice.

Unfortunately, the record of large juvenile corrections facilities is dismal. Though many youth confined in these institutions are not, in fact, serious or chronic offenders, recidivism rates are uniformly high. Violence and abuse inside the facilities are alarmingly commonplace. The costs of correctional incarceration vastly exceed those of other approaches to delinquency treatment with equal or better outcomes, and the evidence shows that incarceration in juvenile facilities has serious and lifelong negative impacts on confined youth.

According to Barry Feld, a leading juvenile justice scholar at the University of Minnesota, “Evaluation research indicates that incarcerating young offenders in large, congregate-care juvenile institutions does not effectively rehabilitate and may actually harm them.” In fact, writes Feld, “A century of experience with training schools and youth prisons demonstrates that they constitute the one extensively

evaluated and clearly ineffective method to treat delinquents.”<sup>1</sup>

Thankfully, the winds of change are beginning to blow in juvenile corrections. A new wave of reform is gathering force, dual-powered by a growing recognition that the conventional practices aren't getting the job done, and by the accumulating evidence that far better results are available through a fundamentally different approach.

Actually, there are two fundamentally different (but complementary) approaches. One, not the subject of this volume, is to substantially reduce the population confined in juvenile correctional institutions by screening out youth who pose minimal dangers to public safety—placing them instead into cost-effective, research- and community-based rehabilitation and youth development programs. In recent years, a number of states (including Alabama, California, Louisiana, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas, plus the District of Columbia) and localities (including Chicago, Detroit, Albuquerque, and Santa Cruz) have systematically reduced their confined youth populations. Tellingly, none of these jurisdictions has seen a substantial uptick in crime as incarcerated youth populations fell. Rather, most have seen lower youth crime rates—and they have reaped substantial savings for taxpayers as well.

The second approach, devised and employed by the State of Missouri's juvenile corrections agency, the Division of Youth Services (DYS), aims at the small minority of youth offenders who must be removed from the community to protect public safety. Departing sharply from the age-old training school model, Missouri has eschewed large, prisonlike correctional institutions in favor of smaller, regionally dispersed facilities. And instead of

standard-fare correctional supervision, Missouri offers a demanding, carefully crafted, multi-layered treatment experience designed to challenge troubled teens and to help them make lasting behavioral changes and prepare for successful transitions back to the community.

In recent years, interest in Missouri's approach has been snowballing. In 2001, the American Youth Policy Center identified Missouri as a “guiding light” for reform in juvenile justice.<sup>2</sup> In 2003, the Annie E. Casey Foundation profiled Missouri's youth corrections success in a widely circulated feature story.<sup>3</sup>

Since that time, hundreds of officials representing 30 states have visited Missouri to tour its youth corrections facilities and learn about its juvenile treatment model. These out-of-state visitors often find these tours eye-opening. Noting the civility, confidence, and openness of the young people they meet, many ask, “Where are the bad kids?”—not realizing that most youth in DYS custody have long records, and many have been adjudicated for serious and violent offenses. (*See Louisiana site visit sidebar on page 24.*)

In October 2007, the *New York Times* ran an editorial labeling Missouri's approach “the right model for juvenile justice.”<sup>4</sup> National Public Radio aired a five-minute feature on Missouri's juvenile corrections system that same month, and in December 2007 the Associated Press ran a 2,600-word article highlighting Missouri's success in youth corrections on its national newswire.<sup>5</sup> In September 2008, Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government named the Missouri Division of Youth Services winner of its prestigious “Innovations in American Government” award in children and family system reform. Finally, in September 2009, ABC television network aired an hour-long

**Departing sharply from the age-old training school model, Missouri has eschewed large, prisonlike correctional institutions in favor of smaller, regionally dispersed facilities.**

FIGURE 1  
**Percentage of Youth Sentenced to Adult Prison within Three Years of Release/Discharge**

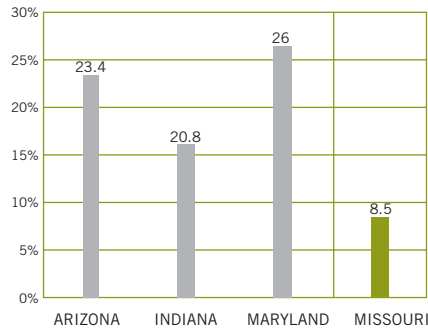


FIGURE 2  
**Percentage of Youth Recommitted to Juvenile Custody or Sentenced to Adult Prison or Probation for a New Offense within One Year of Release/Discharge**

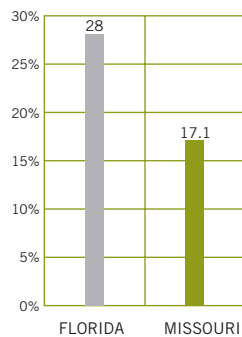
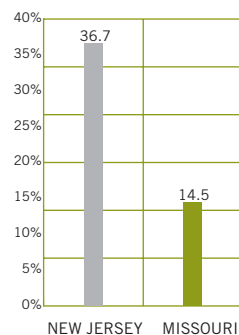


FIGURE 3  
**Percentage of Youth Recommitted to Juvenile Custody or Sentenced to Adult Prison for a New Offense within Two Years of Release/Discharge**



edition of its news magazine, *Primetime*, devoted entirely to the Missouri youth corrections model.

The attention and accolades are well earned, as evidenced by Missouri’s results across a host of juvenile justice outcomes.

### Recidivism

Until recently, few states measured the recidivism of youth discharged from their youth corrections facilities. Still today, the juvenile justice field has not settled on a standard measure of recidivism, and recidivism studies vary widely in their definitions of recidivism and in their methodologies for calculating recidivism rates. Thus, comparing state recidivism rates is an inexact science. However, several states do measure recidivism in similar (if not identical) ways to Missouri, and in every case Missouri’s outcomes appear far better.

- Arizona, Indiana, and Maryland have all issued recidivism reports recently documenting the percentage of youth who were sentenced to adult prison within three years of release from residential confinement in a juvenile facility. The rates were 23.4 percent, 20.8 percent, and 26 percent, respectively. By contrast, just 8.5 percent of youth discharged from DYS custody in 2005 were sentenced to either prison or a 120-day adult correctional program within three years of release. (*See figure 1.*)
- Florida’s Department of Juvenile Justice has reported that 28 percent of youth released from residential confinement in 2003–2004 were either recommitted to juvenile custody for a new offense or sentenced to adult prison or probation within one year of release. Among Missouri youth discharged from DYS custody in 2005, the comparable rate was just 17.1 percent. (*See figure 2.*)



- The New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission released a recidivism study in 2007 showing that 36.7 percent of youth released from the state’s juvenile correctional facilities in 2004 were either re-incarcerated in juvenile facilities for a new offense or sentenced to adult prison within two years. The comparable rate for Missouri youth released in 2005 was 14.5 percent. (See figure 3.)

- Michigan’s youth corrections agency reported in 2007 that 10 percent of youth released from residential confinement between 2002 and 2005 were incarcerated as adults within 24 months of release. In Missouri, the two-year adult incarceration rate (prison and 120-day confinement) for youth discharged in 2005 was 7 percent.

- Wisconsin has reported that 17.5 percent of youth released from juvenile confinement in 2005 were re-incarcerated within two years, either as a juvenile or an adult, due to a new offense—i.e., not a technical violation of probation or parole. The comparable rate for Missouri youth discharged from custody was 14.5 percent.

Overall, of the 1,120 teens released for the first time from a DYS facility in 2005, 90 were subsequently recommitted to DYS for new offenses following release—of whom 28 were also incarcerated as adults or placed on probation within three years of their initial release. Just 66 (5.9 percent) of the 1,120 youth released by DYS were sentenced to state prison within 36 months, 29 (2.6 percent) were sentenced to a 120-day adult correctional program, and 231 (20.6 percent) were sentenced to adult probation. (See figure 4.)

DYS records also show that 110 of the 1,120 youth discharged from custody in 2005 returned to DYS residential facilities briefly after breaking

FIGURE 4

**Three-Year Outcomes of Missouri Youth Discharged from DYS Custody in 2005**

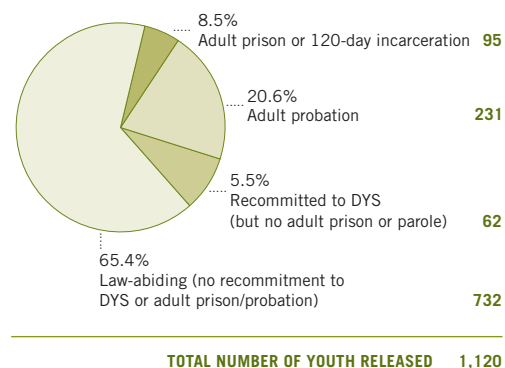
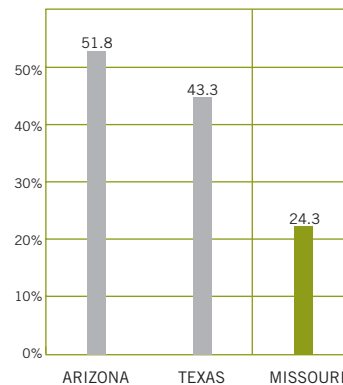


FIGURE 5

**Percentage of Youth Re-incarcerated in Juvenile or Adult Correctional Facilities for Either New Offenses or Rule Violations within Three Years of Release from a Juvenile Facility**



# felony offenders:

## A Deeper Look at Missouri's Recidivism Results

Compared with other states that calculate recidivism using similar definitions, Missouri's results are consistently lower. In many comparisons, youth exiting other states' juvenile corrections facilities are twice as likely (or more) to be re-incarcerated as youth served by Missouri DYS.

Some observers have questioned Missouri's results, citing the fact that nearly half of the youth in the DYS population do not have a felony as their committing offense. However, a closer analysis shows that Missouri's lower recidivism rates are not a byproduct of serving a less serious offending population than other state systems. One reason is that many youth committed to DYS for misdemeanors or status offenses have a prior history of felony offending. Overall, 712 of the 1,120 youth released from DYS custody for the first time in 2005 (64 percent) had a felony adjudication on their records.

Moreover, these felony offenders are nearly as successful as other youth in avoiding further criminal justice involvement following their DYS commitments. Specifically, 37.2 percent of felony offenders discharged from DYS custody in 2005 were either recommitted to DYS or sentenced as adults to probation or confinement with the state corrections department within three years. Put another way, 62.8 percent were successful in avoiding deep involvement with the justice system for three years. The comparable success rate achieved among non-felony offenders was only slightly better: 68.6 percent.

Likewise, the share of DYS felony offenders who were re-incarcerated for a new offense in juvenile or adult correctional facilities within three years (16.3 percent) was nearly identical to the rate for non-felony offenders (15.9 percent).

In other words, youth committed to DYS after being adjudicated for felony offenses, who make up nearly two-thirds of the population served by DYS, are nearly as successful as those with less serious offending histories—and far more successful than youthful offenders (regardless of their prior offending histories) in other states.

rules or experiencing other problems while on aftercare (i.e., after release from the facility but prior to discharge from DYS custody)—usually for one to three additional months. Because youth on aftercare remain in DYS custody, Missouri does not consider these cases failures or include them in its official recidivism data. However, when these temporary setbacks are included in the recidivism results, Missouri’s outcomes remain exceptionally strong—especially compared with states that re-incarcerate large numbers of youth for violations of probation and parole rules. For instance, 43.3 percent of youth released from Texas juvenile facilities and 51.8 percent of Arizona youth released from juvenile custody in 2005 were re-incarcerated in juvenile or adult correctional facilities for rules violations or new offenses within three years. The comparable rate for Missouri youth released from custody in 2005 was just 24.3 percent. (See figure 5 on page 7.)

### Safety

Like youth corrections agencies in other states, DYS requires staff to file a critical incident report whenever a young person is injured, restrained, or held in isolation, and whenever a youth attacks another youth or staff member, or a staff member assaults a youth.

In November 2006, the staff of Ohio’s youth corrections agency published a report comparing the Missouri and Ohio juvenile systems, including a section on safety outcomes.<sup>6</sup> The study showed that while Ohio confined a little more than twice as many youth per day as Missouri in 2005 (average population of 1,752 in Ohio vs. 756 in Missouri), Ohio recorded more than four times as many youth-on-youth assaults as Missouri and nearly seven times as many youth-on-staff assaults. Ohio also recorded 41 sexual assaults statewide versus just two in Missouri.

In addition, the Ohio report documented the use of mechanical restraints and isolation, as well as major property damage and theft, and the reported differences were even more stark. Even after factoring in the greater number of Ohio youth in confinement, Ohio reported using mechanical restraints two-and-one-half times as often as Missouri, suffering major theft or major property damage (\$1,000 or more) nearly 10 times as often, and placing youth into isolation 245 times as often.

### Safety Outcomes: Missouri vs. Ohio

(INCIDENTS PER 1,000 CUSTODY DAYS—2005)

	OHIO	MISSOURI	RATIO
Mechanical Restraints	.69	.28	2.5 : 1
Isolation	1.07	.04	245 : 1
Physical Damage or Theft	.21	.02	9.5 : 1

(VALUED AT > \$1,000)

Missouri’s safety record also stands out compared with the 97 facilities participating in the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators’ Performance-based Standards (PbS) project—a mix of above-average facilities seeking to optimize results and more problematic facilities seeking to address safety issues and other serious problems. According to data compiled by PbS in October 2008 and by DYS in the spring of 2009, assaults against youth are four-and-a-half times as common per capita in participating PbS facilities as in Missouri facilities, and assaults on staff are more than 13 times as common.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, PbS facilities use mechanical restraints 17 times as often as DYS, and they use isolation more than 200 times as often.\*

\* Figures for both PbS and DYS facilities are based on data self-reported by facility staff and cannot be verified independently.

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**Safety Outcomes: Missouri vs. Facilities Participating in the Performance-based Standards (PbS) Project**

RATIO OF SAFETY-RELATED INCIDENT RATES (PER 100 FACILITY DAYS) IN PbS VS. DYS FACILITIES

	PbS : DYS
Assaults on Youth	4.5 : 1
Assaults on Staff	14 : 1
Use of Mechanical Restraints	17 : 1
Use of Isolation	228 : 1

The final testament to Missouri’s success in protecting the safety of confined youth relates to suicide prevention. Not a single youth in DYS custody has committed suicide in the more than 25 years since the agency closed its trainings schools. Nationwide, 110 suicide deaths occurred in juvenile facilities from 1995 to 1999, and another 21 suicides occurred in state juvenile facilities from 2002 to 2005.<sup>8</sup>

**Educational Progress**

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency has estimated that, on average, just 25 percent of confined juvenile offenders nationwide make one year of academic progress for every year in custody.<sup>9</sup> But in Missouri, where every young person takes a standardized test at entry and again before exiting a DYS facility, three-fourths advance at least as fast as a typical student in public school. In addition, 90 percent of youth earn high school credits while residing in a DYS facility.<sup>10</sup>

DYS has also achieved excellent success in helping participants earn a GED or high school diploma.\* In 2008, 278 DYS residents passed the GED exam, and 36 completed all required

\*Two DYS teens earned both a GED and a regular diploma in 2008.

credits and earned high school diplomas—meaning that one-fourth of all youth exiting a DYS facility after their 16th birthdays completed their secondary education. Ohio, by contrast, issued just 296 GEDs and 60 diplomas in 2005 despite serving a population older and far larger than Missouri’s.<sup>11</sup> (Ohio facilities admitted 1,386 youth ages 16 and older in 2005 vs. just 506 in Missouri.) Likewise, South Carolina juvenile corrections facilities issued just 131 GEDs and 3 high school diplomas in 2005–2006, despite an average daily population nearly twice as large as DYS.<sup>12</sup>

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**Educational Progress**

PERCENTAGE OF CONFINED YOUTH MAKING AT LEAST ONE YEAR OF ACADEMIC PROGRESS FOR EVERY YEAR IN CONFINEMENT

Missouri	<b>74.7%*</b>
National Average	25%

\*This figure is an average of youth committed to Missouri Division of Youth Services custody who made adequate progress in reading (76.1 percent) and math (73.3 percent) during fiscal year 2007.

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**Transitions to Community**

While few states track or report on the success of youth exiting juvenile corrections facilities in enrolling in school and securing legal employment, there is no doubt that a high percentage of youth in most states remain disconnected from school and work following release. According to one study, just 12 percent of formerly incarcerated youth earned a high school diploma or GED by young adulthood, compared to a national average of 74 percent.<sup>13</sup>

“Delinquent youth [returning from correctional placements] are likely to have great difficulty

*New York Times Dubs Missouri*

# “the right model for juvenile justice”

*Excerpt from an October 28, 2007, New York Times editorial.*

With the prisons filled to bursting, state governments are desperate for ways to keep more people from committing crimes and ending up behind bars. Part of the problem lies in the juvenile justice system, which is doing a frighteningly effective job of turning nonviolent childhood offenders into mature, hardened criminals. States that want to change that are increasingly looking to Missouri, which has turned its juvenile justice system into a nationally recognized model of how to deal effectively with troubled children...

Missouri has abandoned mass kiddie prisons in favor of small community-based centers that stress therapy, not punishment...

A law-and-order state, Missouri was working against its own nature when it embarked on this project about 25 years ago. But with favorable data piling up, and thousands of young lives saved, the state is now showing the way out of the juvenile justice crisis.

returning to school unless they receive special interventions, and these are in short supply,” report criminologists David Altschuler and Rachel Brash. “School systems have often not been receptive to enrolling juvenile offenders.”<sup>14</sup>

Bucking this trend, DYS does provide “special interventions” to facilitate school enrollment and post-release success of formerly confined Missouri youth. By employing a comprehensive case management system and providing intensive aftercare support, Missouri enabled the vast majority of youth exiting DYS custody in 2008 (85.3 percent) to be productively engaged in school, college, and/or employment at the time of discharge.<sup>15</sup>

## **Cost**

Given all of these strong results, another impressive feature of Missouri’s approach to youth corrections is its relatively low cost to taxpayers.

Due to peculiarities in Missouri’s budgeting process, the official budget for the Division of Youth Services—\$63 million in 2008—substantially understates the actual cost of services by excluding fringe benefits of DYS employees and some central administrative costs. However, even a more realistic DYS budget estimated at \$87 million—equivalent to \$155



**Missouri's unconventional approach to youth corrections has sustained political support for nearly three decades under governors from both political parties.**

for each young person of juvenile age<sup>16</sup>—would still represent a cost to taxpayers that is lower than or comparable to the juvenile corrections costs in most states and substantially less than some.

For instance, Missouri's spending on youth corrections appears higher than that of Arizona and Indiana, but far lower than Maryland and Florida.\*\* Not including costs for juvenile probation, which is a state function in Maryland but not Missouri, Maryland's juvenile corrections agency spends more than \$270 for every young person of juvenile age. Florida spends over \$220 for every young person, not including costs for probation and detention, which are state-run in Florida but operated locally in Missouri.<sup>17</sup>

One key factor in Missouri's ability to keep costs down is the relatively brief period of confinement for DYS youth—typically ranging from 4–6 months for youth placed in non-secure group homes to 9–12 months for youth in secure confinement. Many states retain youth in custody far longer. For instance, the average length of stay in North Carolina juvenile facilities was 386 days in 2007,<sup>18</sup> while California youth average three years in confinement.<sup>19</sup> Also, unlike Missouri, many states commonly return youth for long commitments if they violate behavioral rules while on aftercare. Another factor in Missouri's modest juvenile justice costs are the salaries paid to DYS workers, which are lower than those of youth corrections workers in many states.

\*The juvenile-age population in Missouri includes all young people between the ages of 10 and 16, because juvenile court jurisdiction ends at age 16. Any Missouri offender aged 17 or older is considered an adult.

\*\*The juvenile-age population in Maryland and Florida includes all young people between the ages of 10 and 17, because juvenile court jurisdiction in those states ends at age 17.

Ultimately, the greatest source of savings generated by the Division of Youth Services derives from the success of program graduates in avoiding future crimes. Criminologists estimate that steering just one high-risk delinquent teen away from a life of crime saves society \$3 million to \$6 million in reduced victim costs and criminal justice expenses, plus increased wages and tax payments over the young person's lifetime.<sup>20</sup> Missouri's current director of adult corrections, George Lombardi, credits DYS with saving the state millions of dollars by reducing the recidivism of juvenile offenders into adult prisons.<sup>21</sup>

Thanks to these many demonstrated benefits, Missouri's unconventional approach to youth corrections has sustained political support for nearly three decades under governors from both political parties—including tough-on-crime conservatives such as former U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, who served as Missouri's governor from 1985–93.

In other states, too, the need for Missouri-style change is urgent. For the well-being of troubled youth, for the safety of citizens and communities, for the fiscal health of states and the bank accounts of taxpayers, the Missouri model for youth corrections offers substantial advantages over the training school approaches still pervasive throughout most of the nation.

This monograph has been compiled as a tool to help officials and advocates in other states support this needed change. The first clear and detailed description of the Missouri approach, this report includes information on both the nuts and bolts of Missouri's methods, and the underlying values and beliefs that guide its heartening success.

## Nuts and Bolts of the Missouri Model

When you ask leaders of the Missouri Division of Youth Services about the keys to the agency's success, they invariably speak first of values and beliefs—and about their agency-wide commitment to helping delinquent youth make deep and lasting changes that enable them to avoid negative (criminal, anti-social, self-destructive) behaviors and to begin on a pathway to success.

In pursuing this purpose, however, DYS has built a unique therapeutic treatment system with many attributes that distinguish it from the youth corrections systems in other states and provide a window into its success.

Developed and fine-tuned over many years, the Missouri youth corrections model is epitomized by six core characteristics:

**one.** Missouri places youth who require confinement into smaller facilities located near the youths' homes and families, rather than incarcerating delinquent youth in large, far-away, prisonlike training schools.

**two.** Missouri places youth into closely supervised small groups and applies a rigorous group treatment process offering extensive and ongoing individual attention, rather than isolating confined youth in individual cells or leaving them to fend for themselves among a crowd of delinquent peers.

**three.** Missouri places great emphasis on (and achieves admirable success in) keeping youth safe not only from physical aggression but also from ridicule and emotional abuse; and it does so through constant staff supervision and



**Empowering**



**Warehousing**

# system overview

- There are 45 separate juvenile circuits and 24 locally operated juvenile detention centers.
- Juvenile probation is operated locally in the 10 largest counties, and by state courts in the remainder of the state.
- At age 17, a youth is considered an adult for new law violations.
- Youth can be transferred to adult court only at the discretion of a judge—no statutory waivers or direct file by prosecutors—and only about 120 cases per year are transferred. Judges may also assign youth to a “dual jurisdiction” program in which they receive adult sentences but are treated initially in the juvenile system and can have their adult prison sentences suspended by a judge if they respond favorably to juvenile treatment.
- The state’s juvenile corrections agency, the Division of Youth Services, is a part of the Missouri Department of Social Services.
- DYS typically retains jurisdiction for juvenile offenders until discharged or until the youth reaches age 18, or in dual jurisdiction cases until age 21.
- In addition to supervising juvenile offenders committed to its care, DYS administers a \$4 million per year Juvenile Court Diversion program that provides funding to help local courts strengthen their community-based programs and reduce commitments to state custody.

supportive peer relationships rather than through coercive techniques that are commonplace in most youth corrections systems.

**four.** Missouri helps confined youth develop academic, pre-vocational, and communications skills that improve their ability to succeed following release—along with crucial insights into the roots of their delinquent behavior and new social competence to acknowledge and solve personal problems.

**five.** Missouri reaches out to family members and involves them both as partners in the treatment process and as allies in planning for success in the aftercare transition, rather than keeping families at a distance and treating them as the source of delinquent youths’ problems.

**six.** Missouri provides considerable support and supervision for youth transitioning home from a residential facility—conducting intensive aftercare planning prior to release, monitoring and mentoring youth closely in the first

crucial weeks following release, and working hard to enroll them in school, place them in jobs, and/or sign them up for extracurricular activities in their home communities.

*The following pages detail the nuts and bolts for each of the six unique elements of the Missouri approach.*

### **one: Small and Non-Prisonlike Facilities, Close to Home**

When the Annie E. Casey Foundation profiled the Missouri Division of Youth Services in 2003 for its magazine, *AdvoCasey*, the feature story was entitled “Small Is Beautiful.”

Indeed, perhaps the most obvious difference between Missouri’s youth correctional facilities and those in other states is size. Whereas most youth confined in state juvenile correctional facilities nationwide are housed in institutions with more than 150 beds,<sup>22</sup> the largest of Missouri’s 32 residential youth corrections programs has only 50 beds.\* Each of the seven secure care facilities serves 36 youth or fewer.

Missouri’s reliance on small facilities is recent. From 1887 until 1983, the Boonville Training School—a 158-acre campus of two-story brick residence halls—was Missouri’s primary correctional facility for boys, holding up to 650 teens at a time. Youths’ treatment at Boonville was often harsh, and violence was commonplace—resulting in a steady stream of alarming news headlines spanning several decades. In the 1970s, DYS began to experiment with smaller and more therapeutic correctional programs.

\*These 32 programs are located on a total of 26 campuses, including one campus with six different programs. However, individual programs at this site have completely separate buildings, staff, and administrative leadership, and interaction between youth in different programs is minimal.

Liking the results, and tired of endless scandals at Boonville, Missouri’s legislature and executive leadership shut down the Boonville training school in 1983 and donated the facility to the state’s Department of Corrections, which turned it into an adult penitentiary.

In place of Boonville, as well as a training school for girls in Chillicothe that closed in 1981, DYS secured smaller sites across the state—abandoned school buildings, large residential homes, even a convent—and outfitted them to house delinquent teens. The largest of the new units housed just 30 to 36 teens. In addition, DYS continued to operate programs in two sites with capacity for 50 youth (five groups of ten), as well as six small but separate programs with combined capacity for 100 youth, which operate inside the same park in St. Louis County.

### **The Importance of Facility Size**

According to both Missouri insiders and national justice experts, Missouri’s switch to smaller facilities was crucial to improving its juvenile corrections system. Paul DeMuro, a veteran juvenile justice consultant, suggests, “The most important thing in dealing with youthful offenders is the relationships, the one-on-one relationships formed between young people and staff. And not just the line staff. It’s critical that the director of the facility know every kid by name.”

Ned Loughran, executive director of the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators, warns, “The kids coming into juvenile facilities need a lot of specialized attention, and they need to develop a relationship with staff.” Loughran adds, “A small facility allows the staff to get to know the kids on a very individual basis. The kids interact better with peers and staff.” Large facilities routinely suffer with high

**“If you are just sitting in a cell with nobody to help you there is not much you are learning.”**  
—DYS Student

**Several states measure recidivism in similar (if not identical) ways to Missouri, and in every case Missouri's outcomes appear far better.**

rates of staff turnover and absenteeism, “so the kids spend a lot of time sitting in their rooms... With large [facilities] it's like going to a large urban high school. Kids get lost, and these kids can't afford to get lost.”

### **A Regional Continuum**

In addition to the individualized attention they foster, smaller facilities have allowed Missouri to localize programming and avoid shipping delinquent young people to distant facilities far from their homes and communities.

Since closing the training schools in the early 1980s, DYS has divided the state into five regions and erected a complete four-level continuum of programs and facilities in each, including:

**Community care.** DYS places committed youth with the least serious offending histories and the lowest likelihood of reoffending into community-based supervision programs. Statewide, 12 percent of DYS youth are placed directly in these non-residential services. Many of these youth are assigned to “day treatment” centers, where they spend from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. every weekday in a combination of academic education and counseling. After school, many participate in community service or academic tutoring activities, or in individual or family counseling. (The state's 10 day treatment programs, which serve up to 171 youth on any given day, also serve as a step-down for some youth following their time in a residential program.) Other youth in community care attend regular schools but are actively supervised by a DYS case manager (known as a “service coordinator”), and they may receive family counseling, intensive supervision and support from community-based mentors, counseling or

support groups, job placement assistance, life skills training, or other services.

**Group homes.** Youth with limited offending histories and a low risk of reoffending are often referred to one of the seven nonsecure group homes scattered throughout the state. Each of these group homes typically houses 10–12 youth who have committed only status offenses or misdemeanors—young people who pose little danger to the community but require more structure, support, and supervision than their families can provide. Group home youth attend school onsite, not in public schools, but they spend considerable time away from their facilities in jobs, group projects, and other community activities. Within the facilities, they participate in extensive individual, group, and family counseling. The typical stay in a group home lasts four to six months.

**Moderately secure facilities.** Youth with somewhat more serious offending histories or higher risk levels are placed into one of the state's 20 moderately secure facilities located in residential neighborhoods, state parks, and two college campuses. Though many youth sent to these facilities have been adjudicated for felony offenses, they too spend time in the community. Closely supervised by staff, residents regularly go on field trips and undertake community service projects. Those who make progress in the counseling component of the program and demonstrate trustworthiness are often allowed to perform jobs with local nonprofit or government agencies as part of DYS' extensive work experience program. The typical stay in a moderate care facility lasts six to nine months.

**Secure care facilities.** For the most serious offenders referred by Missouri juvenile courts, DYS operates seven secure care residential



# an inglorious history:

## Now a Model, Missouri's Youth Justice System Was Once Scandalous

Though highly regarded today, Missouri's juvenile corrections system has not always been exemplary. Indeed, for many decades it was plagued by severe, even shameful problems at its primary correctional facility for boys, the Boonville Training School.

Until its closure in 1983, Boonville was repeatedly cited for severe abuses. Soon after losing his job in 1949, for instance, former Boonville Superintendent John Tindall described the facility in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*: "I saw black eyes, battered faces, broken noses among the boys," Tindall wrote.<sup>23</sup> Three boys died inside the facility in 1948 alone. Conditions remained problematic from the 1950s through the 1970s, reported University of Missouri law professor Douglas Abrams in his history of the state's juvenile courts published in 2003.<sup>24</sup> A 1969 federal report condemned Boonville's quasi-penal-military atmosphere, particularly the practice of banishing unruly youth to the Hole—a dark, solitary confinement room atop the facility's administration building.

The seeds of change were finally planted during the 1970s, when DYS began to experiment with smaller and more therapeutic correctional programs. Liking the results, and tired of endless scandals at Boonville, Missouri's legislature shut down the Boonville training school in 1983—donating the facility to the state's Department of Corrections, which turned it into an adult penitentiary.

In place of Boonville, as well as a training school for girls in Chillicothe that closed in 1981, DYS secured smaller sites across the state—abandoned school buildings, large residential homes, even a convent—and outfitted them to house delinquent teens. The largest of the new units housed only three-dozen teens, and DYS made group treatment the core of its rehabilitative approach in every facility.

These changes were momentous. However, they did not signal the end of reform in Missouri—but only the beginning. Indeed, Missouri leaders have continued ever since 1983 to build on and improve its programs and services—and also to cultivate support from political and civic leaders throughout the state, and across the political spectrum.

For states struggling to combat deep problems in their youth corrections systems, Missouri's message is twofold: (1) no matter how troubled your system may be today, success is possible, and (2) the answer lies not in any single reform, but rather a long-term commitment to continuous improvement.

facilities, each with a typical daily population of 30 youth and a maximum capacity of 36. Unlike other DYS facilities, the secure care youth centers are surrounded by a perimeter fence and are locked at all times. In most ways, the daily activities in secure care facilities are similar to those in less secure residential settings. However, youth confined in secure care participate less frequently in activities outside their facilities. Instead, secure care programs often bring the community into the facility for activities and experiences, and then gradually reintroduce youth into the community as they progress in the treatment program and demonstrate readiness. The typical stay in a secure care facility lasts nine to twelve months (but can extend longer if the young person fails to progress in treatment or demonstrate readiness for release).

In addition to these regional facilities, DYS also operates a single facility for youthful offenders placed into Missouri's dual jurisdiction program. This program was created in the mid-1990s at a time when many states drastically increased the number of youth transferred to adult courts and correctional systems. Missouri largely steered clear of wholesale transfers. Instead, it created a new alternative in which young people who are tried and convicted as adults can be given a "blended sentence" in the adult and juvenile systems. The adult sentence is suspended initially, and the youth is assigned to the DYS dual jurisdiction facility where they receive the same treatment regimen as youth in other DYS programs. Prior to their 21st birthdays, these youth return to court where a judge decides whether to release them outright, place them on adult probation, or impose the adult sentence and transfer them to prison.

Missouri DYS

# population overview

## **1,250+ youth committed to DYS custody each year; over 2,800 served**

- 82% male; 18% female
- 45% 16 and over
- 66% from metro areas
- Age of young people served ranges from 10–21
- 75% from single-parent (57%) or step-parent families (18%)

## **Committing offenses**

- 51% felonies\*
- 38% misdemeanors
- 11% juvenile offenses

## **Educational disability and mental health conditions**

- 34% educational disability
- 49% prior mental health condition; 38% with an active diagnosis

\*As detailed in the sidebar on p. 8, many DYS youth whose committing offense is a misdemeanor or juvenile offense have previously been adjudicated for felony offenses. Overall, 64 percent of DYS youth have a history of felony offending.

# Not a single youth in DYS custody has committed suicide in the more than 25 years since the agency closed its trainings schools.

Of the 64 young people referred to the dual jurisdiction program since 1996, 39 had successfully completed DYS treatment by November 2008. (Another 18 remained in DYS custody, and seven had been transferred to prison because they did not respond to DYS treatment.) Among the 39 youth who completed DYS treatment, all were placed on probation by judges rather than transferred directly to prison, and 31 had avoided prison since release—a success rate of 79.5 percent.

## **A Non-Institutional Environment**

Regardless of the level of care, DYS facilities are designed and furnished in a distinctly non-correctional style. At every level, youth sleep not in cold concrete cells but in carpeted, warmly appointed dorm rooms containing 10–12 beds, with a dresser and closet space for each young person. Youth in even the most secure facilities are permitted to dress in their own clothes, not correctional uniforms, and to keep personal mementos on their dressers. In most facilities, each dorm is part of a larger “pod” that also includes a living room furnished with couches and coffee tables, plus a “treatment room” where the team meets for 60 to 90 minutes every evening and youth talk about their personal histories, their future goals, and the roots of their delinquent behavior.

No iron bars—indeed, little security hardware of any type—are visible in DYS facilities, though the secure care facilities are surrounded by security fences. Instead, facility walls are adorned with handmade posters and colorful bulletin boards displaying residents’ writings and art work. Many facilities have live plants. One has an elaborate fountain constructed by residents, and all have at least some type of pet—ranging from dogs and cats to live chickens, even an iguana. The pets help make the environment of the facilities “more humane,” says DYS Director Tim Decker. In some cases, they are also a focus of student projects. In one facility, the residents raise chickens and harvest eggs. In another, a secure care facility, youth are working with dogs rescued from the Humane Society and retraining them for adoption by area families.

This hospitable physical environment is reinforced by the social atmosphere within DYS facilities. Confined youth address DYS staff—even the agency director and other administrative leaders—by their first names. Staff are trained to welcome youths’ questions, and to treat youths’ ideas and opinions with respect.

“Why I think they’re such a good system is that they have preserved the community aspect even in the secure programs,” says Ned Loughran. “When you visit, you can see that they’re not

institutional. They've been able to preserve... a family atmosphere."

## **two: Individual Care Within a Group Treatment Model**

### **The Importance of Groups**

In every DYS residential facility, at every level, each young person spends virtually every minute, night and day, with his or her treatment team. The teams, which typically number 10–12 youth, sleep in the same dorm room, eat together, study together, exercise together, do chores together, and attend daily therapy sessions together—always under the watchful supervision of DYS youth specialists. The groups have rotating entry and exit: young people leave the group and head home as soon as they demonstrate readiness for release, and new youth come in to take their place.

These small groups serve as the crucible in which the DYS treatment process attains focus and intensity. The constancy of the group does not allow young people to hide or withdraw. Rather, the youth remain under the watchful eyes of not only staff, but also their peers, and they are held accountable by the group for any disruptive, disrespectful, or destructive behavior. Rather than facing isolation or punishment when they act out, youth are called upon to explain their thoughts and feelings, explore how the current misbehavior relates to the lawbreaking that resulted in their incarceration, and reflect on how their behavior impacts others. These challenging conversations are a frequent facet of the group treatment experience. At least at the outset of their DYS confinement, many youth find this type of interpersonal accountability far more difficult than the forms of accountability (isolation, mechanical restraints,

loss of privileges) typically meted out in conventional youth correctional facilities.

The DYS commitment to group treatment is so strong that—other than managing psychotropic medications—the agency seldom offers individual psychotherapy for any of the 49 percent of confined youth who come to DYS with identified mental health problems.\* “The group is the primary treatment modality in our system, and nothing is allowed to supplant the group process,” says Tim Decker. “When one region became more reliant on clinical therapy, we found that staff began undervaluing their own expertise and deferring to the therapists, and the kids weren’t doing as well. So we do sometimes provide individual therapy, when a youth has special needs, but everything is subordinate to the group process.”

On the other hand, many youth do participate in family therapy while confined in DYS facilities—generally toward the end of their stay as they prepare to return home. Often, the request for family therapy comes from the treatment team staff or service coordinator, and the DYS family therapists work closely with facility staff to make sure that family therapy supports and reinforces the group treatment process.

Another testament to DYS’ intense commitment to group treatment can be seen in its policy requiring groups to attend school together, with a dedicated teacher, rather than dividing youth by ability level and allowing them to attend classes with similarly skilled youth from other groups. Given the wide range in educational ability among confined youth

\*When youth exhibit extremely severe mental health problems, DYS reserves the option to purchase placement in private residential psychiatric treatment centers rather than place them in a DYS facility. However, DYS leaders report that fewer than 10 youth per year are sent to private treatment for this reason.

**Every young person committed to DYS custody is immediately assigned to a single staff person—known as a service coordinator—who will oversee his or her case before, during, and after placement in a DYS facility.**

(elementary school level, middle school level, and pre-GED level, plus youth with learning disabilities), this policy clearly adds a degree of difficulty to the challenges facing DYS teachers—how to individualize instruction to the needs and abilities of each student. The practice also limits DYS’ ability to provide specialized courses for more advanced students. DYS leaders acknowledge those concerns, but they note that DYS classrooms have very high teacher-student ratios—one certified teacher plus a youth specialist (typically certified as a substitute teacher) working with a class of a dozen or fewer students. They also point to the results cited in the previous chapter: the overwhelming majority of DYS youth learn faster than their same-age peers in public school, and more than 300 earned a GED certificate and/or high school diploma in 2008 (even though virtually all youth are under 18 at the time of discharge from DYS).

### Individualizing Care Within the Group Context

Despite its avid adherence to a group treatment approach, DYS employs many techniques to individualize the treatment process for each young person—beginning the very first day of their commitment.

**Individualized case management.** Perhaps the most important DYS strategy to individualize care is its case management system. Every young person committed to DYS custody is immediately assigned to a single staff person—known as a service coordinator—who will oversee his or her case before, during, and after placement in a DYS facility. The service coordinator conducts an initial risk- and needs-assessment process, measuring risk of reoffending and the seriousness of current and past offenses, as well as his or her treatment needs. Based on the results of the risk assessment, the service coordinator determines the level of care appropriate for the young person as detailed in

Placement/Length of Stay				
S E R I O U S N E S S	Most Serious 10+	Moderately Secure Residential LOS = 6–9 months	Secure Residential LOS = 9–12 months	Secure Residential LOS = 9–12+ months
	Moderately Serious 6–9	Community-Based Residential LOS = 4–6 months	Moderately Secure Residential LOS = 6–9 months	Secure Residential LOS = 9–12+ months
	Least Serious 2–5	Non-Residential LOS = 1–6 months	Community-Based Residential LOS = 4–6 months	Moderately Secure Residential LOS = 6–9 months
		Lowest Risk 2–10	Moderate Risk 11–17	Highest Risk 18–22
R I S K O F R E O F F E N D I N G				



the chart on page 21. The service coordinator then serves as an ongoing point person with the youth's parents and other family members during the period of confinement, and makes visits on at least a monthly basis to check on the young person's progress in the facility. The service coordinators are actively involved in the decision over when each young person should return home, and they are the primary person in developing a pre-release success plan for the young person and in supervising him or her in the critical phase of aftercare supervision. Statewide, DYS employs 102 service coordinators and supervisors spread across the agency's five regions.

**Indeterminate sentencing.** With cooperation from juvenile judges across Missouri, DYS also individualizes treatment for delinquent youth by adjusting the length of confinement based on their progress in treatment and readiness to return safely to community life. In most states, juvenile judges either sentence youth to a fixed period of confinement—like an adult convict—or they require state corrections officials to seek judicial approval before releasing youth from correctional facilities, placing them on aftercare, or releasing them entirely from state supervision.

In 82 percent of Missouri cases, once judges commit a youth to DYS custody they cede responsibility for all subsequent decisions to DYS—granting DYS the responsibility to determine whether to place the young person into a residential program (and at what security level), how long to hold them, when to release them, and how long to supervise them on aftercare status.\* Indeterminate sentences also allow DYS to move a youth back and forth between

\*In many of the remaining cases, judges order residential care but allow DYS to determine the level of residential care and the length of stay.

residential and community care, permitting DYS staff to reconfine a young person who struggles in the aftercare period or exhibits risks for reoffending.

The indeterminate sentencing is significant on two levels, say Missouri officials. First, it allows DYS to customize each young person's treatment and make the young people themselves responsible for their own length of stay. This creates a powerful incentive for positive participation: if youth cooperate, participate actively, and complete the required stages of treatment promptly, their stay will likely be shorter; but if youth hold back, undermine, slack off, and avoid the treatment tasks, their stay will likely be longer. Releases are based on youths' progress and readiness, not an arbitrary release date. Second, the fact that the vast majority of juvenile judges choose to grant indeterminate sentences—even when state law allows them to retain control—illustrates the goodwill DYS has built with the states' judiciary and the deep faith judges have developed in the DYS treatment system.

**Level system.** With most youth entering its facilities without any fixed date for returning home, DYS employs a level system to track progress and determine each young person's readiness for release. Though the terms and definitions vary slightly by region, DYS generally considers its treatment process in four stages:

- *Orientation*, during which young people become acclimated to the procedures, expectations, and environment of the DYS facility;
- *Self-discovery*, where young people enter the self-exploration process and begin seeing how their current problems and behaviors are rooted in their personal and family histories, and where they take responsibility for their past crimes and misdeeds;

- *Integration*, when young people begin applying the lessons they're learning about themselves in the here-and-now, by taking on a leadership role within their group, reopening channels of positive communications with their parents and other family members, and applying themselves in new jobs, community service projects, and other learning activities; and

- *Transition*, where youth begin working with facility staff, their service coordinators, and their families to develop a plan for success when they return home.

DYS provides no hard-and-fast benchmarks to delineate when a young person has moved from the self-discovery phase into integration, for instance, or integration into transition. Rather, each young person's movement from one level to the next is determined subjectively by the staff team, with input from other youth in the group, in consultation with the youth's service coordinator. The most important facet of this process is that—other than youth who age out of the system—no young person leaves a DYS facility until he or she completes the levels and demonstrates both the desire and the skills to succeed and remain crime-free upon release.

**Self-exploration via daily group treatment sessions.** At every residential DYS facility, each group meets every evening to talk about their personal histories, their future goals, and the roots of their delinquent behavior. Some days the teens participate in group-builders—shared activities designed to build comradery, discuss the impact of their crimes on victims, and help teens explore issues like trust, perceptions, and communication. Other days, the treatment session is spent dealing with an event or issue that has surfaced in a group member's life—a difficult family visit or phone home, a problematic behavior that persists—or a tension that

has arisen between two or more members of the group.

But in many meetings, one particular teen will talk to the group about his or her life. Indeed, over the course of their stays, a young person will typically lead at least five sessions dedicated to the core exercises in the DYS treatment process. The first is a “who am I?” exercise in which youth list their favorite people, foods, cars, movies, etc. In subsequent sessions, the topics become more personal. In the “life history,” teens are asked to—and often do—talk about wrenching experiences in their lives: domestic abuse, violence, sexual victimization, and family negligence. They are also encouraged to speak about their crimes, mistakes, and other misdeeds. In the “genogram,” teens spend the hour describing and answering questions about a coded family tree (prepared in advance, with the help of a staff mentor)—detailing the incidence of domestic violence, alcoholism, drug addiction, criminality, illiteracy, and other pathologies in their families—as a first step toward exploring the historic roots of their own behavioral problems. For the “line of body,” confined adolescents describe and discuss a large sheet of paper onto which they have traced their bodies and then written in the most searing physical and mental traumas they have suffered during their young lives. In the final session, “success plan,” youth nearing departure from the facility describe to their peers—and hear questions and feedback on—all the steps they will take to maximize their chances of success following release.

The sessions take place in a separate treatment room, part of the each group's living area (or pod), facilitated not by licensed therapists but by the team's group leader or another of the team's more experienced youth specialists. Every young person attends and takes part in every



**In this “line of body” drawing, a 15-year-old DYS resident has traced all of the physical and emotional scars of his young life. The line of body is one of several exercises youth undertake as part of the DYS treatment process.**

For Louisiana Leaders, Visiting a DYS Facility Proves

# an eye-opening experience

*The following scene from a site visit to the DYS facility at Watkins Mill State Park is excerpted from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Spring 2003 issue of AdvoCasey.*

After driving through the entry gates of the Watkins Mill State Park one gray November afternoon, two dozen well-dressed powerbrokers traverse a gravel parking lot and approach a nondescript wood frame building. The front door is unlocked.

Inside, the walls are decorated with crepe paper, and the air is infused with the welcoming aroma of hot cider. A half-dozen teens—African Americans and whites, boys and girls—greet the visitors warmly.

Though they have been sentenced here for serious (but mostly nonviolent) crimes, the youth are dressed in their own clothes—no jumpsuits, no military crew cuts. The teens laugh and joke with their staff, they look visitors in the eye, they smile easily as they offer up cider and a snack.

Most of the visitors have come from Louisiana, members of a commission established by the state legislature to explore reforms of the Bayou State's deeply troubled juvenile corrections system.

The group is understandably tired. This is stop number three today in a whirlwind tour of juvenile facilities in and around Kansas City. But something about this site sparks their attention: There are no fences here, and no heavy locked doors. The path to escape is wide open.

"Why don't you run?" asks one member of the delegation, a county judge. "Do you ever think about running?"

The question is posed to a tall, slender 16-year-old with a speech impediment and deep scars crisscrossing his face.

"I did when I first got here," the boy says. "I was making my plan. But then I saw that the other kids weren't going anywhere, they were thinking about their futures. And I saw that the staff here really cared. So I changed my mind.

"I'm in here because I stole a car and crashed it going 85 miles an hour," the boy continued, his voice suddenly trembling. "I need to get this surgery finished. I need to make some different choices. I don't want to spend the rest of my life running."

That evening, at a going-away dinner in downtown Kansas City, Louisiana representative Diane Winston stood up at a podium and confessed that "until now, this issue of juvenile justice has just been words and numbers to me. But this tour has really put a human face on the issue for me. It's a face of hope."

session, and all are encouraged to participate by asking questions and offering advice and support. Staff are provided extensive training in facilitating the treatment sessions, and they concentrate on keeping the discussion respectful at all times, focused on the youth making his or her presentation, with a minimum of side conversations and other distractions.

**Dedicated staff mentors.** As individual DYS youth create their genogram, trace their line of body, and prepare for each of the other elements of their treatment process, they are guided and supervised by one of the DYS youth specialists assigned to staff the group on an ongoing basis. The staff mentor—often referred to as a “one-on-one”—is identified as soon as the young person is assigned to the facility, and the mentor reaches out immediately to provide support and advice. Throughout the young person’s stay, the one-on-one will check in with him or her several times per week—acting as a sounding board and providing support if the young person feels that another youth (or a small clique of them) is teasing or harassing him or her, if he or she is having problems with a particular staff member, or if there’s a problem in the youth’s family. Then, when the group’s staff team holds its weekly meeting, the one-on-one will lead the discussion of the young person’s progress—including any talk about whether the youth should be recognized for completing his/her current level and moving to the next.

### **three: Safety Through Relationships and Supervision, Not Correctional Coercion**

The success of the DYS approach—indeed, the entire Missouri model—depends on helping troubled and chronically delinquent young people make deep and lasting changes in how

they behave, think, view themselves, and foresee their futures.

To make those changes, youth undergo a process of sometimes searing self-reflection. They learn about themselves, repair relationships with family, develop their social and emotional competence, and grapple with their plans for the future. In the course of this process, many will need to reveal and talk about painful aspects of their pasts and repair relationships with family. Change is hard—inner change most of all.

Before a process leading toward change can even begin, however, there must be safety—not just physical safety, but emotional safety as well—because without it youth are unlikely to proceed in their personal treatment process. Youth who feel disrespected are likely to act out against their peers—or may even become a danger for self-harm. “Kids need to know they’re not going to be ridiculed or humiliated,” says Phyllis Becker, the deputy director of DYS.

However, in most juvenile facilities nationwide, physical and emotional safety are scarce commodities. Fights are commonplace, threats and name-calling even more so. Youth are subject to ridicule for any perceived weakness, any area of differentness—a different skin color or accent. Geographic rivalries—and sometimes gang rivalries—roil beneath the surface and occasionally explode. The dangers are particularly acute during free time periods when youth are supervised by correctional officers—guards—who typically stand apart from youth, watching from afar. When an incident does arise, youth are often shackled, or handcuffed, sometimes pepper sprayed, then placed into isolation cells for days or weeks as punishment.

Missouri employs an entirely different approach. Rather than trying to impose safety through coercive correctional practices, DYS

**Before a process leading toward change can even begin, there must be safety—not just physical safety, but emotional safety as well—because without it youth are unlikely to proceed in their personal treatment process.**

# waking up

## To the Promise of Juvenile Corrections Reform

*Reprinted from the Missouri Division of Youth Services' successful application to Harvard University's Innovations in American Government awards competition. In 2008, DYS was recognized as the outstanding innovation in children and family system reform nationwide.*

To understand how the Missouri Department of Social Services' Division of Youth Services' innovation has changed practice, imagine for just a moment that you're 16 years old. You lie awake in your metal bunk-bed in a large unfurnished barracks-style room. You look around the unit and see 48 other young men in their prison-issued orange jumpsuits, one part of a large secure facility serving 350. You can't help but wonder how your life got out of hand so quickly. You can barely remember the abuse that has scarred you so deeply. You haven't seen your family for months. They live 150 miles away. You gently rub the bruised area around your eye and wonder when your rival will return from his isolation cell. He's spent 3 days there, 23 hours a day, and has to be even angrier. The uniformed guards are across the way with billy-clubs and mace just in case something starts. You can't remember their names, but it really doesn't matter because everyone calls them "officer" or "sir". You've learned to follow their commands, just do your time. You can't help but remember the judge telling you how tired the public is of your criminal activity. Could adult prison really be worse? You'll probably find out, since you have a 50/50 chance of ending up there. Suddenly, you wake up! You've had a nightmare, the same one lived everyday by young people in juvenile justice systems around the country.

Now imagine a different experience. It's morning now and time to get up for breakfast, do chores, and get ready for school and the day's rigorous schedule. You step onto the floor of your group's home-like dormitory and move to your personal closet to pick out clothes for the day. There are just 10 other young men in your group. The staff members wear normal clothes and are addressed by their first names. You call a "circle" to get the group's attention so you can talk about your nightmare. The group quickly assembles and is seated in the group's living room to listen and provide support. The nightmare generated some feelings of fear that you suspect are connected to childhood experiences. The group offers time in the daily group meeting that evening, but also assures you they will be there anytime you need to talk. The group is like family and you know the staff care, almost as if you were their own child. It's off to school, where you'll stay with your group while participating in challenging lessons and receiving individualized help. You never realized how intelligent you were. You now plan to go to college after receiving your diploma from the Division of Youth Services.

You reflect for a moment and remember that you're one of the lucky ones—you live in Missouri. The Training School for Boys has closed and you're in the care of the Division of Youth Services after years of innovation. You're in a small treatment center close to your home, have the same service coordinator as your advocate the entire time, your family is attending family therapy, and you're safe. You are hopeful about the future, knowing that you have a 90% chance of being successful. Your group, staff team, family, and a community liaison council full of caring adults are all there to support you. While many states around the country built youth correctional facilities with barbed wire, guards, and isolation cells; Missouri remembered that you were still a child, a work in progress. They were clear about their principles and moved forward with innovative practices that have now been confirmed by research and practice. They kept trying until they found what works.

strives to create safety through constant supervision and staff leadership—by showing no tolerance for physical or emotional abuse, and by cultivating an enveloping atmosphere of healthy relationships and mutual respect.

As one secure care Kansas City youth explained to a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times*, “Most of us come in with a fighting mentality, but pretty soon we realize that there’s no need for that here.”<sup>25</sup>

### Rejecting Correctional Coercion

The question of punishment in Missouri is resolved at commitment. Youth are sentenced to DYS custody if their lawbreaking has been sufficiently serious and the harm they’ve caused significantly severe. This involuntary placement into a DYS facility is their sanction. Once the youth enter a facility, however, the sole focus turns to treatment. DYS youth receive structure, counseling, direction, and support. They are required to work hard, confront difficult issues and behave responsibly toward their peers, families, staff, and other adults.

The environment inside DYS facilities, even for the most serious offenders, is intentionally humane. Missouri has not found it necessary or useful to employ armed guards, cells, pepper spray, prolonged isolation, or any of the other harsh trappings of conventional correctional confinement. Rather, DYS staff maintain order through constant and attentive supervision—treating youth in the manner in which they should treat others, expecting them to comply, and questioning them respectfully but purposefully when they act out.

For instance, the Riverbend Treatment Center—one of the seven secure care juvenile facilities in Missouri—contains a room that resembles tens of thousands of cells in training

schools coast to coast: gray cement floor, white cinder-block walls, narrow cot, and open, stainless-steel toilet. Only at Riverbend, this cell is one-of-a-kind, and it’s rarely used. In fact, most of the time the cell is filled with supplies—all of which must be removed in those very rare emergencies when one of the 30-or-so residents loses his temper and requires a cooling-off period. Indeed, not a single youth was placed into the cell in 2008, reports Assistant Facility Manager Lorna Young. The most recent incident came in May 2007. Other than a metal detector at the front door and a perimeter fence surrounding the property, there are few locked doors and little security hardware of any type at Riverbend: just video cameras linked to monitors in the central office. Isolation is never used as punishment at Riverbend—or any other DYS facility—and youth are never left alone to languish. Rather, whenever a young person is placed into the cell a staff person remains just outside the door—and young people rarely spend more than an hour or two before rejoining the group and resuming their normal activities. DYS requires prior approval of management staff before the cell is used and each occurrence is documented and closely monitored. Only six of the 32 DYS facilities statewide have even one such cell, and DYS Director Tim Decker says that the agency uses the isolation cells fewer than 25 times per year statewide.

Likewise, unlike many states, DYS does not allow the use of pepper spray, nor does it permit demeaning or potentially dangerous techniques such as hog-ties, face-down restraints, or electrical shocks, which have been widely reported in other jurisdictions. Strip searches, too, are strictly forbidden. DYS does employ video cameras throughout its seven secure care facilities, which are beamed into a wall of video monitors in the facility’s central

**Rather than trying to impose safety through coercive correctional practices, DYS strives to create safety through constant supervision and staff leadership—by showing no tolerance for physical or emotional abuse, and by cultivating an enveloping atmosphere of healthy relationships and mutual respect.**



**Rather than hiring high school graduates without respect to their interest or capacity for youth work, DYS recruits many of its workers on college campuses across the state—and it winnows applicants through an intensive interviewing process.**

office and recorded on videotape—allowing administrators to review critical incidents after the fact.

### **Safety Through Supervision and Relationships**

So, if not through the commonplace tools of correctional security, how does Missouri keep youth safe in its facilities?

The answer begins and ends with people—with intensive supervision by highly motivated, highly trained staff constantly interacting with youth to create an environment of trust and respect. When Missouri first began treating youth in groups during the 1970s and early 1980s, staff struggled initially to impose order and create safety.

“We didn’t know what we were doing [at first]. The boys ran us ragged,” recalls Gail D. Mumford, who began working with DYS as a youth specialist in 1983 and later served as the agency’s deputy director. “They were acting up every day, sometimes every hour.”

Gradually, though, the functioning of the groups improved—and safety increased dramatically—as DYS adopted three key safety ingredients:

**High-caliber staff.** Soon after closing its training schools and embracing the group treatment approach statewide in the early 1980s, DYS made a crucial decision to redefine the job of frontline workers. No longer would DYS staff work in their traditional role as guards or correctional officers, with a primary concern on enforcing rules and punishing misbehavior. Rather, staff would now fulfill a new role as youth specialists with responsibility for the “safety, personal conduct, care and therapy” of the youth.

Since then, rather than hiring high school graduates without respect to their interest or capacity for youth work, DYS has recruited many of its workers on college campuses across the state—and it has winnowed its applicants through an intensive interviewing process to determine whether would-be staffers are personally committed to helping youth succeed and possess the personality traits—good listening skills, empathy, clear and concise speaking style, ability to command respect—needed for the job. The youth specialist job classification requires at least 60 hours of college experience—and 84 percent of youth specialists currently have either a bachelor’s degree or 60-plus hours of college plus two years of DYS experience. Also, because its facilities are located throughout the state—in urban and rural locations alike—DYS has been able to recruit a racially and ethnically diverse staff that reflect the backgrounds of the youth it serves.

During their first two years, new youth specialists are required to complete 236 hours of training, much of it dedicated to the underlying DYS values and beliefs. The training also includes multiple sessions on youth development, family systems, and group facilitation, including extensive practice applying these concepts through role playing and other participatory exercises. (In their first months, until they’ve completed 103 hours of core training, new youth specialists aren’t left alone with a group—instead, they work in tandem with more experienced staff.) Over time, staff members return for at least 40 hours per year of additional in-service training to reinforce their skills and bring them up to speed on new concepts and treatment techniques.

**Active around-the-clock supervision.** Concerned over continuing incidences of violence

and other discord in its treatment groups in the early 1980s, DYS leaders stepped back and studied the situations that led to problems. They determined that most incidents occurred when youth were out of staff sight—when three young people take the trash outside, for instance, or two youths went into the bathroom together unattended. They also noted that most incidents happened at night. Based on these observations, the agency reorganized its staffing patterns to ensure that in every DYS facility every group is constantly supervised by one or more youth specialists—night and day, week-day and weekend, 52 weeks of the year. For DYS youth, there is no such thing as free time without at least one of their team’s dedicated youth specialists present.

Moreover, except when the youth sleep at night, this supervision is active rather than passive. Staff are constantly talking with group members, engaging in activities with them. Their presence and positive example provide a calming influence on the groups. Also, remaining in constant close contact allows DYS staff to identify and resolve any tensions, upsets, and rivalries as they emerge—rather than letting situations fester and boil over into violence or conflict. Staff are trained to notice changes in young people’s facial expressions and their body language, and to take note when cliques are beginning to form or young people are being ostracized by other group members.

In secure care facilities, this around-the-clock supervision takes the form of constant “double coverage”—where two DYS staffers are present with every group, at all times. DYS has found that by keeping two sets of eyes and two calming influences present with the groups at all times, it can maintain an atmosphere of safety and respect that allows even its most

challenging participants to stay focused on their work and positive in their behavior.

**Minimizing fear, maximizing trust, fostering respect.** Ultimately, DYS has learned, the safety of any group is directly correlated with the interpersonal atmosphere that exists among the young people and between the youth and their dedicated staff team. As a result, DYS youth specialists are trained extensively in conflict management and employ a number of techniques designed to defuse potential trouble and foster a safe environment.

At least five times per day the youth check in with one another, telling their peers and the staff how they feel physically and emotionally. And at any time, youth are free to call a circle—in which all team members sit or stand facing one another—to raise concerns or voice complaints about the behavior of other group members (or to share good news). Thus, at any moment the focus can shift from the activity at hand—education, exercise, clean up, a bathroom break—to a lengthy discussion of behaviors and attitudes. Staff members also call circles frequently to communicate and enforce expectations regarding safety, courtesy, and respect, and also to recognize positive behaviors.

Youth specialists are especially mindful to protect the emotional safety of youth—refraining from language that might be perceived as disrespectful, and stepping in to protect young people from any unkind actions by others in the peer group. Also, youth specialists are trained to solicit and validate the feelings of young people. Then, once youth have expressed their emotions, staff help them to understand the roots of their feelings and learn how to distinguish thoughts from emotions and to channel their emotions in constructive and non-destructive directions.

The Missouri Model in Action: Personal Growth Through

# community service

*On December 30, 2008, an article in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch described a new program at the Hogan Street Regional Youth Center, a secure care facility in St. Louis, where confined youth train dogs who've been abandoned. In particular, this excerpt details the relationship between Ryan, a 17-year-old Hogan Street resident, and King, a hound-German Shepherd mix that was found abandoned as a puppy in a run-down city neighborhood.<sup>26</sup>*

[Ryan] was 4 when his mother was murdered. His father was already in prison for a violent crime. Left to an unstable network of relatives, he relied on himself to survive a world driven by meth, heroin, drug dealing and stealing.

He had a short temper. Friends died of overdoses in front of him. He didn't care whether he died. "I was just ready to accept it at a young age," [Ryan says]...

As he speaks, Ryan gently sweeps aside the super-sized dog paw tapping on the table in front of him, as if looking for a hand to hold.

Soon the dog nudges his boxy snout up onto the edge of the table.

"Down, King," Ryan says calmly while gently tugging his leash to lead the dog back to the floor.

It has been about a month since Ryan and another teen began training King and several other rescued dogs through Loosen the Leash, a new, nonprofit program under way inside Hogan Street, a state rehabilitative facility that houses some of Missouri's most serious juvenile offenders.

The program teaches teen offenders the fine details of dog training. For three months, the juveniles live with the dogs and train them, preparing them for adoptions and, hopefully, a safe and stable new home.

But in a world where teens like Ryan and dogs like King have been given few boundaries, little love and endless turmoil, it shows the juveniles something even greater. Patience, respect, praise, empathy and control don't just win over disobedient dogs, but also are the tools the teens must use to build their own second chance at a future...

Ryan says it will be difficult saying goodbye to King, but he also knows he has given the dog something that he, too, desperately wants.

"I know that he'd rather go to another family than not have a family at all," he says.

### When Crises Arise

Through these techniques and strategies, DYS has achieved an admirable safety record. Every once in a while, however, tempers flare or a young person runs amok and endangers the group. For these extreme situations, facility staff train the youth to help restrain any peer who loses control and threatens the group's safety. Only staff members are authorized to call for a restraint, but once they do the young people grab arms and legs and subdue their peer on the floor. Once down, the team holds the youth in place until the young person regains his or her composure. Once calm, staff encourage the youth to talk about what prompted the loss of control, and how they can recognize and respond differently to such situations in the future.

The practice of peer restraints is controversial. Many experts reject it outright, and DYS leaders themselves stress that no jurisdiction should adopt peer restraints until the facility has created an atmosphere of safety and trust. As yet, none of the jurisdictions striving to replicate Missouri's approach has adopted a policy of peer restraints.

However, notes Tim Decker, serious injuries do not occur during peer restraints, and injuries are far less common in Missouri than in states that rely on billy-clubs and mace—as are assaults and other critical incidents. Former DYS Director Mark Steward also defends youth restraints on practical grounds. “We don't have 200-kid facilities with 100 staff we can call in to break things up,” he says. And even if the staffing was available, “if we had to wait for the staff to arrive [whenever a fight broke out], someone's gonna get their head beat in.”

DYS staff make every effort to diffuse situations before they reach the point of physical confronta-

tion, and whenever a restraint does occur, the group and team “process” the incident thoroughly to prevent a reoccurrence. DYS reported a total of 1,170 restraints in 2008—about one for every 235 youth custody days.

### four: Building Skills for Success

At DYS, protecting young people in custody from physical and emotional harm is a core goal—and a moral responsibility. But safety is not just an end in itself. It is also a means by which DYS creates the favorable conditions necessary to help youth acquire crucial skills and insights for the future. These include the self-awareness and communications skills they'll need to reverse negative behavior patterns and turn themselves into positive parents, partners, neighbors, and citizens in adult society, plus the academic and pre-vocational skills they'll need to become productive workers.

### Fostering Self-Awareness and Communications Skills

Perhaps the most immediately noticeable benefit young people accrue through the DYS treatment process is a striking increase in their self-awareness and communications skills. DYS facilities frequently host visitors—anything from the local Elks Club to an out-of-state delegation of juvenile justice officials. The tours are always led by youth themselves, and frequently, the visitors walk away not just surprised, but often amazed.

Linda Luebbering, who once analyzed the DYS budget for the Missouri Division of Budget and Planning and later served as the budget division's director, vividly recalls that, on her first visit to a DYS facility, “I was surprised that I was walking into a facility like that—these were hard-core kids—and I was completely

**The ease DYS youth develop in communicating with strangers—their comfort in talking to adults, making eye contact, articulating a positive message—is a natural outgrowth of the DYS treatment process.**

**For the well-being of troubled youth, for the safety of citizens, for the fiscal health of states, the Missouri model for youth corrections offers substantial advantages over the training school approaches still pervasive throughout most of the nation.**

comfortable to go up and talk to them about their treatment. I ended up in a long conversation with a very well-spoken young man.” Only later did Luebbering learn that the youth had committed murder. “It made a big impression on me.”

The ease DYS youth develop in communicating with strangers—their comfort in talking to adults, making eye contact, articulating a positive message—is a natural outgrowth of the DYS treatment process. As noted earlier, DYS young people check in several times per day and tell peers and staff how they’re feeling physically and emotionally. When young people misbehave, staff don’t mete out punishments but instead require youth to explain their actions, and talk about their impact on others. Other youth are encouraged to voice their opinions and provide support as well.

By constantly soliciting young people’s thoughts, and by treating their ideas and feelings respectfully, the DYS treatment process steadily builds young people’s confidence and competence as communicators.

“I was impressed that the kids really understood what the program was all about,” recalled David Addison, a juvenile public defender from Baltimore County, Maryland, following a tour of DYS facilities. “They were able to express it a lot better than a lot of the staff could explain it here in Maryland.”

### **Pursuing Academic Progress**

As noted earlier, DYS takes an unconventional approach to education—teaching youth together in their treatment groups regardless of aptitude and prior academic achievement. Every weekday throughout the year—no summer break—each group sits in its own dedicated classroom with its own dedicated,

certified, DYS-paid teacher, plus another DYS youth specialist, for six hours of learning time. The education program is fully accredited by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Despite wide differences in ability, the groups undertake many learning activities as a whole class—often breaking into small groups to work together on exercises. (In many cases, the more advanced students will help less advanced students.) At other times, the students work by themselves on lessons assigned by the teacher and geared to their individual academic needs—whether they be basic fractions, or final preparations for the GED exam. Students with learning disabilities and other special education needs may be pulled out of class on a regular basis to work with a special education instructor.

This format—essentially a one-room schoolhouse for each DYS treatment group—clearly limits the amount of time the students spend working as a class on lessons geared specifically to each student’s academic level. Yet, with two adults working with each class of just 10–12 students, opportunities for individualized attention are plentiful. And because the group remains intact, discipline remains high and a conducive atmosphere for learning pervades. The results, as detailed in the opening chapter, show that this trade-off is more than justified. Again, in both reading and math, more than 70 percent of DYS youth progress at a rate equal to or greater than their same age peers attending regular public schools. And, more than 300 DYS youth earned a high school diploma or obtained GEDs while in DYS custody in 2008.

### **Opportunities for Hands-on Learning**

In addition to classroom learning, DYS provides plentiful opportunities for youth to apply their skills in real-world contexts. These include:

# The environment inside DYS facilities, even for the most serious offenders, is intentionally humane.

**Jobs.** Using a \$678,000 annual appropriation from the Missouri state legislature, DYS provides actual work experience for more than 900 youth per year at all levels of care.\* With help from local community advisory councils, facility staff identify work opportunities appropriate for DYS youth with nearby public and nonprofit agencies. At Camp Avery, one of several DYS facilities located on state park land, DYS youth work alongside park rangers helping to improve the facility grounds. Typically, youth are selected to participate toward the end of their commitments—after they have made significant progress in their treatment process and demonstrated responsible behavior inside their facility. Participating youth are paid minimum wage for their time on the job—much of which is used to pay restitution or contribute to the state’s Crime Victims Restitution Fund. More than 95 percent of selected youth participate successfully.

**Community service.** In addition to paid work experience, DYS youth participate regularly in community service projects at homeless shelters, senior centers, hospitals, and other charitable organizations. For instance, at the

secure care Hogan Street Regional Youth Center in St. Louis, youth provide training for stray dogs in partnership with the local animal shelter. (See sidebar on page 30, *Missouri Model in Action*.)

**Applied learning.** Finally, DYS teachers and youth specialists also strive to provide hands-on learning opportunities to complement the academic learning. Thus, students at programs in the Kansas City region build full-size soapbox derby cars as part of their math and science curriculum and compete in a yearly regional event. Students at the secure care Hogan Street Regional Youth Center in St. Louis perform Shakespeare plays as part of their literature curriculum, and students throughout the state compete in “Olympic” events each year focused on academic learning, social cooperation, and physical education. Most programs have active student councils, providing youth with the opportunity to develop skills in leadership, planning, and self-governance.

## five: Families as Partners

One of the most commonplace and crippling flaws in many state juvenile corrections systems is the failure to reach out to, engage, and support the parents and other family members of delinquent teens. As former Annie E. Casey Foundation President Douglas W. Nelson wrote

\*Community job placements are less uncommon for youth in secure care, due to safety concerns, but secure care facilities make up for the gap by creating meaningful career-related work opportunities within the facility or as the youth transitions to aftercare.



in a 2008 essay, *A Roadmap for Juvenile Justice Reform*, “An overwhelming body of research and experience shows that parents and families remain crucial and that effectively engaging and supporting parents is pivotal to successful youth development... [Yet] most juvenile justice systems are more inclined to ignore, alienate, or blame family members than to enroll them as partners.”

Missouri takes a markedly different approach. The Division of Youth Services provides extensive training on family systems and family engagement for all of its youth specialists, and it employs a cadre of family therapists steeped in the group treatment process—indeed, many of the family therapists began their careers as DYS youth specialists before training as mental health professionals. From the very first day a young person is committed to DYS custody, parents and other family members are systematically engaged.

### **Immediate Outreach**

As soon as any young person is placed in state custody, the DYS service coordinator meets with parents and delivers a message that “the youths and their families are encouraged to engage, invest and take ownership in the process as active collaborators” and that “treatment and services are done with, rather than to, the youths and their families.” (Because a high percentage of DYS youth come from single-parent families, and absent parents are not involved in many cases, these meetings often involve just one parent.)

### **Ongoing Consultation**

DYS facilities schedule regular visiting hours for families, and both facility staff and service coordinators actively encourage family members to attend—sometimes offering transportation

assistance when lack of a car or accessible public transportation makes visiting difficult.

### **Family Therapy**

According to DYS, 25 to 30 percent of DYS youth participate in some form of family therapy before leaving custody. Often, the family therapy takes place toward the end of a residential commitment—after the young person has made substantial progress in treatment—and focuses on helping parents and youth jointly change negative family dynamics and create an alliance to support the youth’s continued success. Therapists may offer parents constructive suggestions on how to provide firm and consistent (but positive) discipline—and how to avoid crises where tempers fly out of control. In some cases, the therapy focuses initially on the needs of the parents themselves—some of whom require help with physical or mental health problems, substance abuse, financial stresses, or legal difficulties. In joint sessions, the therapists strive to create new alliances between youth and their parents—and agreements on new rules that will maintain order in the home.

### **Partnership in Release Planning and Aftercare**

Whether or not the youth and his/her parent(s) take part in family therapy, the DYS service coordinator involves parents extensively in planning for every young person’s release—reenrolling in school, identifying suitable extracurricular activities, setting curfews and other rules to supervise the young person (along with suggestions for how to deal with any missteps).

If a young person’s parent or parents are not willing or able to provide a safe and supportive home, DYS seeks out grandparents, aunts/uncles, and other relatives who might take the

youth in safely. And in a small number of cases, youth are placed into independent living programs. Following release, the service coordinators check in regularly with parents and family members—and make regular face-to-face visits to support both youth and family members in the crucial reentry process.

### **six: Focus on Aftercare**

The final key element in the Division of Youth Services approach is a thoughtful and aggressive approach to aftercare—the critical period in which young people reenter the community and resume their normal lives following a period of confinement.

According to David Altschuler, the nation's foremost scholar on juvenile aftercare, any progress made by youth in juvenile corrections institutions “is generally short-lived, unless it is followed-up, reinforced, and monitored in the community. Having no responsibility, authority, or involvement with anything other than institutional adjustment and progress, the institution and its staff have little incentive or interest in what ultimately happens to youths in the community.”<sup>27</sup>

Not so in Missouri. There, DYS employs multiple strategies to assure that gains made in treatment are sustained in the world beyond.

### **Pre-release Planning**

Before a young person leaves a DYS facility, the youth's service coordinator convenes a series of meetings with the young person and his/her family members, as well as staff members from the youth's treatment team in the facility. In the meetings, plans are made for reenrolling the young person in school, identifying employment opportunities (or sometimes enlistment in the military or enrollment in Job Corps), and planning community service and/

or extracurricular activities. Also, youth and parents agree to curfews and other new ground rules for the youth's behavior in the home. Prior to their release, most youth return home for one or more short-term furloughs to prepare for reentry and identify any potential problems. To hold itself more accountable for results in pre-release planning, DYS developed a new performance indicator in 2006 to track whether young people are enrolled in school and/or employed at their time of discharge from DYS custody. (In 2008, 85.3 percent of youth were productively engaged at discharge.)

### **Continuing Custody**

Following release from a DYS facility, most youth remain under DYS supervision on aftercare status. The period of aftercare supervision is indefinite—determined by DYS on a case-by-case basis—but typically lasts four to six months. While on aftercare, DYS retains full custody of the youth, including the authority to return the young person to residential confinement if he or she shows signs of falling into anti-social and delinquent behavior patterns.

### **Monitoring and Mentoring in the Community**

While on aftercare, youth have regular meetings and phone calls with their service coordinators. Many—perhaps two-thirds—are also assigned to a “community-based mentor,” often a college student working with DYS part time. These mentors serve as role models and confidantes for the youth, and they provide an extra point of contact to monitor how well the young people are meeting expectations for school attendance and participation in other required activities. (The community-based mentor program has also proven an excellent recruiting technique for DYS—allowing college students studying in human services to launch their careers in the division.)

**Sustaining success requires ongoing vigilance to protect against what the agency terms “drift”—the gravitational pull toward more punitive approaches, and the ever-present distractions and disruptions that can cloud the agency's focus on public safety and the well-being of troubled young people.**

## Underlying Values, Beliefs, and Treatment Philosophy

As important as any of the specific techniques and practices employed by the Missouri Division of Youth Services—or perhaps more important—are the values and beliefs that underlie them.

DYS prides itself on being mission focused. Indeed, DYS leaders frequently revise and revamp agency practices in their efforts toward continuous improvement. What doesn't change is the mission: to help youth in custody make positive, lasting changes that lead them away from criminality and toward success.

Also unwavering at DYS is a set of longstanding core beliefs. The three most important of these beliefs are: (1) that all people—including delinquent youth—desire to do well and succeed; (2) that with the right kinds of help, all youth can (and most will) make lasting behavioral changes and succeed; and (3) that the mission of youth corrections must be to provide the right kinds of help, consistent with public safety, so that young people make needed changes and move on to successful and law-abiding adult lives.

The rest of this chapter will describe these core DYS values and beliefs in more detail, reducing these philosophical tenets to accessible everyday language. Specifically, it will discuss DYS principles in three key domains:

- Beliefs about youth and their capacity for change.
- Beliefs about the process required for troubled young people to make lasting changes and achieve success.



**Therapeutic**



**Correctional**

- Beliefs about the environment required in youth correctional facilities to support this successful delinquency treatment process.

### Beliefs About Youth

The core of the DYS philosophy is a belief that every young person wants to succeed—and can succeed. All youth hunger for approval, acceptance, and achievement. No matter how serious their past crimes, and no matter how destructive their current attitudes and behaviors, DYS considers every young person a work in progress. Each is redeemable and deserves help.

The agency takes seriously its responsibility to protect society from youth who would commit crimes and cause harm. Yet, DYS believes that public safety is best achieved not by shaming delinquent youth for their crimes, not by inflicting punishment, but rather by providing a therapeutic intervention designed to challenge young people and help them make lasting changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

Through long experience, DYS has learned that these changes cannot be imposed on young people. Delinquent youth can't be “scared straight”; they cannot be reformed through a military-style boot camp; and few will be deterred from crime by fear of punishment. Rather, change can only result from internal choices made by the young people themselves—choices to adopt more positive behaviors, seek out more positive peers, and embrace more positive goals.

DYS recognizes that change is difficult—and that relationships are critical to overcoming resistance and fostering positive change. DYS understands that not only troubled youth, but all people tend to resist and fear change. The agency has found that youth respond best and

overcome resistance most readily when they know that staff members care about them and expect them to succeed. Young people also benefit enormously both from helping and being helped by other youth in the treatment group.

DYS believes that youth are likely to engage in treatment and to consider new directions only when they are immersed in a safe, nurturing, and non-blaming environment where they are listened to and guided by trusted adults, encouraged to try out new behaviors, and treated with patience, acceptance, and respect.

DYS remains mindful that every young person is unique. Each DYS youth has chosen to engage in delinquent behaviors based upon his or her own individual circumstances, and each will make the decisions to change and grow—or not to—for his or her own personal reasons. Every young person requires individual attention to his or her needs and circumstances, and DYS must respond flexibly and provide whatever it takes to help each youth succeed.

DYS has learned that some youth lapse into serious and chronic delinquency as a coping mechanism in response to earlier abuse, neglect, or trauma. In these cases, DYS believes that the underlying difficulties must be acknowledged and addressed before change is likely to occur. For other youth, delinquency has less deep-seated roots—adolescent thrill-seeking, clouded judgment due to substance abuse, involvement with deviant peers and/or gangs, lure of fast money through drug dealing or other crimes.

Regardless of the roots of their problem behaviors, DYS believes that delinquent youth typically suffer from a lack of emotional maturity—an absence of insight into their own behavior patterns, an inability to distinguish between feelings and facts, perception and reality, along with an underdeveloped capacity to

**DYS has learned that these changes cannot be imposed on young people. Delinquent youth can't be “scared straight”; they cannot be reformed through a military-style boot camp; and few will be deterred from crime by fear of punishment. Rather, change can only result from internal choices made by the young people themselves.**

The Missouri Model:

# underlying beliefs and values about youth

- Every young person wants to succeed—and can succeed.
- Public safety is best served not by punishing young people or shaming them for their crimes, but by offering a therapeutic intervention to help them make lasting changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.
- These lasting changes cannot be imposed on young people. Youth can't be scared straight, reformed, or deterred from crime by fear of punishment. Rather lasting changes can only result from internal choices made by the young people themselves.
- Like all people, troubled youth tend to resist and fear change. Positive relationships with staff and other youth are critical to overcoming resistance and fostering positive change.
- Every young person requires individual attention. Each DYS youth has chosen to engage in delinquent behaviors based upon his or her own circumstances, and each will make the decisions to change and grow—or not—for his or her own personal reasons.
- Some youth lapse into serious and chronic delinquency as a coping mechanism in response to earlier abuse, neglect, or trauma. For other youth, delinquency has less deep-seated roots.
- Regardless of the roots of their behavior problems, delinquent youth typically suffer from a lack of emotional maturity—an absence of insight into their own behavior patterns, an inability to distinguish between feelings and facts, and an underdeveloped capacity to communicate their emotions or express disagreement or anger responsibly.
- All behavior, no matter how destructive, has an underlying emotional purpose. Therefore, rather than punishing or isolating young people when they act out, the best response is to ask probing questions that help the youth understand the roots of the problem and identify more constructive responses.
- Most youth entering custody have very low confidence in their ability to succeed as students—or eventually as workers in the mainstream economy. And most have had limited exposure to mentors and positive role models.
- While the DYS staff and treatment process are important, parents and other family members remain the most crucial people in youths' lives—and the keys to their long-term success.



communicate their feelings clearly and express disagreement or anger responsibly.

Another central tenet of the Missouri approach is that all behavior, no matter how maladaptive or destructive, has an underlying emotional purpose. Therefore, the emotions expressed by young people during treatment should not be judged, lest youth withhold their feelings and lose out on crucial opportunities for personal growth. When a young person acts out or misbehaves, DYS believes the best response is not to punish the youth with swift consequences or isolation, but rather to challenge him or her with probing questions that help the young person understand the roots of the problem behavior, the underlying needs they seek to meet—and to help the youth identify more constructive responses.

DYS also observes that most youth entering custody have very low confidence in their ability to succeed as students—or eventually as adult workers in the mainstream economy. For a variety of reasons—poverty, lack of parental support, chaotic and low-performing schools, combined with their own behavior problems and (in many cases) learning disabilities—few DYS youth have experienced success in school. Most are years behind grade level in reading, writing, and math.

Likewise, because they come disproportionately from families troubled by poverty, addiction, and/or abandonment, and from communities marred by pervasive poverty and crime, many DYS youth have had limited exposure to mentors and positive role models. Enabling youth to taste success in the classroom and to develop positive relationships with DYS staff (and other adults) can provide an invaluable impetus for them to embrace healthy attitudes and adopt a law-abiding lifestyle. DYS staff help fill this void—at least temporarily—by taking an active

interest in the young people's thoughts and feelings, helping them identify realistic and constructive goals for the future, and treating them consistently with dignity and appreciation.

Finally, DYS believes that while its staff and treatment process are important, parents and other family members remain the most crucial people in young people's lives—and the keys to their long-term success. Families retain enormous influence over youth, for good or ill. Repairing family relationships is a powerful motivator for virtually every young person who enters a DYS facility.

### **Beliefs About the Change Process**

DYS believes that an effective therapeutic process must begin with physical and emotional safety. Young people cannot engage in a meaningful change process when they are subject to (or made to be fearful of) physical or sexual abuse, excessive use of force and isolation, or overmedication by staff, or when they are being hit, shoved, grabbed, slapped, twisted, pinched, or otherwise attacked. Likewise, youth cannot progress in treatment if they are intimidated, overwhelmed, humiliated, or spoken to in demeaning ways by staff, or if they are teased, belittled, ridiculed, or ostracized by other youth.

In pursuing safety, however, DYS believes that the coercive correctional tools commonly employed in most youth corrections facilities—such as razor wire, isolation cells, uniformed guards armed with handcuffs and pepper sprays, etc.—are unnecessary and counterproductive.

Instead, DYS believes that physical and especially emotional safety are best protected through a relationships-based approach aimed at fostering a positive and respectful social

**When a young person acts out or misbehaves, DYS staff challenge him or her with probing questions that help the young person understand the roots of the problem behavior and identify more constructive responses.**



**Maintaining a positive atmosphere within treatment groups requires continuous supervision—night and day, day-in and day-out, without interruption—by dedicated staff who know and care about each young person, and who are knowledgeable about group process.**

atmosphere within the treatment group. Keys to sustaining this nurturing atmosphere include:

**Group treatment.** The small group approach allows DYS to assign a stable staff team and team leader, which fosters meaningful and trusting relationships between youth and staff and creates an intimate atmosphere in which a healthy group culture can evolve. Also, group treatment is important because—as DYS puts it—“change does not occur in isolation.” Peers take on enormous importance during adolescence. So allowing youth to interact consistently with their peers in a supervised environment creates valuable opportunities for youth to practice new ways of communicating, develop positive and healthy peer relationships, and experience the fulfillment of helping and being helped by peers.

**Constant eyes-on, ears-on supervision.** Maintaining a positive atmosphere within treatment groups requires continuous supervision—night and day, day-in and day-out, without interruption—by dedicated staff who know and care about each young person, and who are knowledgeable about group process. These staff must be alert, with their eyes and ears attuned to any emerging problems, tensions, or conflicts. In addition, they must possess the facilitation skills needed both to step in and deescalate tensions before they spiral out of control, and to use each situation as an opportunity to help youth explore their behaviors and progress in their path of maturation and self-discovery.

**Strong programmatic structure.** DYS schedules a busy slate of activities every day, morning till evening—with minimal down time. Experience has shown that long stretches of unstructured time are an invitation to restlessness

and mischief, which can lead to problematic behaviors. (*See sidebar with daily schedule.*)

DYS believes that the therapeutic process leading to sustained behavioral change includes five core stages. In the first stage—*orientation*—young people enter this safe and therapeutic environment and become acclimated to the routines and expectations of life in a DYS facility, where the aggressive or belligerent behaviors many have relied upon habitually for self-defense and stature are neither required nor rewarded.

Once oriented, young people begin the second phase of the treatment process—*personal growth and self-discovery*. Many times every day—when the group checks in with each other at the outset of each new activity, when a circle is called to explore some tension or problem behavior that has arisen in the group, in their private conversations with staff members, and especially in their daily treatment groups sessions—the young people are asked to think and talk about their feelings and to discuss their behaviors: How do they respond to perceived slights? How is their behavior different in the presence of male vs. female staff? How do they behave in potentially embarrassing situations? What strategies do they use to earn the respect and admiration of others? Staff also seek to connect these discussions to youths’ lives outside the facility: How has the young person responded to similar situations in the past? How might they respond differently to achieve a better outcome? Through these interactions, youth gradually:

- gain insights into their own thought processes and behavior patterns, including the dysfunctional and destructive behaviors that brought them into the correctional system;

- identify the emotional triggers that typically lead them to act out and lose emotional control—and the touchy topics that cause them to clam up, or act out, when they’re discussed;
- examine how current behaviors are connected to past experiences, and especially to the dynamics within their own homes and families; and

- develop the capacity to express their emotions clearly, calmly, and respectfully—even negative emotions like anger and fear.

While this self-discovery process will continue throughout their time in custody (and beyond), DYS youth gradually move into an *integration* or *mastery* phase where—informed by their new self-knowledge—they begin to “try on” and get comfortable with new behaviors, and

Typical Daily Schedule for a Missouri DYS Facility	
TIME	ACTIVITIES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS
6:00 AM	Youth wake up, attend to personal needs, and complete dorm details.
6:30	Morning check in, followed by breakfast and kitchen details. After details, youth return to the dorm, set daily goals, and prepare for school.
8:00	School—classes typically total 300+ minutes per day.
11:30	Group check in, lunch, kitchen details.
12:30 PM	School continues according to class schedule.
3:00	School day ends. Youth return to the dorms and check in/process their day. Thirty minutes free time is allowed.
5:00	Youth prepare for dinner and kitchen details.
6:00	Group meetings.
8:00	Youth make phone calls, have free time activities, then shower and prepare for bed.
9:00	Youth journal and process goals set during the morning.
9:30	Lights out.
DEFINITIONS	
CHECK IN	Youth share how they are feeling physically, emotionally, and mentally. During check in/process time, youth identify concerns, set goals, report on goals, encourage each other, and/or share group reminders.
DETAILS	Youth perform routine cleaning duties. Details are scheduled monthly and rotated between the groups.
FREE TIME	Youth have brief and structured time to listen to headphones, work on treatment assignments, journal, write letters, play board games, draw, and/or read.

Steering just one high-risk delinquent teen away from a life of crime saves society \$3 million to \$6 million in reduced victim costs and criminal justice expenses, plus increased wages and tax payments over the young person's lifetime.

internalize new attitudes. In this stage, the challenge for youth is to begin applying their new self-knowledge in their everyday lives—learning to behave consistently as mature, responsible, and focused-on-the-future young adults:

- exercising leadership within the group by mentoring newer group members and helping maintain a positive and respectful climate among the team;
- learning to avoid emotional outbursts and aggressive or self-destructive behavior by setting personal boundaries and navigating situations that provoke these reactions, and by practicing strategies to express their feelings constructively and redirect themselves when they begin getting upset and sliding into negative behaviors; and
- participating in family therapy, where they work with a therapist and their family

members to identify, discuss, and resolve underlying tensions—and where the families begin to work out strategies in advance to address problems that might arise when youth return home.

Often concurrent with this integration/mastery phase, DYS youth begin the process of *goal-setting*—talking with service coordinators, facility staff, parents, and others to create a positive and realistic plan for their futures. For those who are thriving in their academic studies, this will include preparing for the GED exam or completing the requirements for a high school diploma, and beginning to explore opportunities to pursue college admission or other postsecondary job training. For others, the focus will be on options for employment, military service, or enrollment in the Job Corps or other job training. Also in this phase, many youth are gaining experience as productive

members of the community—through DYS-sponsored jobs, community service projects, and other activities.

This goal-setting, along with the personal growth and behavioral improvements achieved in the earlier phases, leads directly to the *transition* phase where youth prepare for release and then return to the community—with ongoing support from their service coordinators and other DYS staff. Prior to release, youth begin:

- developing detailed “self-care” plans for their return to the community—where they will live and what rules they will live by, where they will attend school and/or look for work, and how they will deal with delinquent peers and avoid dangerous situations and other negative influences that led them astray previously;
- reconnecting with their families (or other guardians), and making a series of home visits in preparation for their final release; and
- making connections with community members who might serve as resources and supports for the young person following release, as well as employers who might hire them.

Once home in the community on aftercare, youth act on and readjust their plans with ongoing support from their service coordinator and community-based mentor. Also, both prior to release and during aftercare, service coordinators and family therapists provide continuing support to parents (or other guardians)—working with parents to improve their capacity to exert positive discipline, helping parents address personal difficulties that conflict with effective parenting, and facilitating positive change within the youth’s home following release.

### **Beliefs About Facilities and Their Environments**

As detailed in the previous chapter, the Missouri model is built upon a regionalized network of small facilities, rather than one or a handful of large prisonlike training schools. Missouri’s small facilities are appointed with comfortable homelike furnishings, creating an atmosphere more like a school dormitory than a prison. Inside the facilities, Missouri young people wear their own clothes and keep personal effects in their rooms and on their dressers. In general, Missouri designs the treatment environment to normalize the experience for youth, to the extent possible, based on its belief that the less they treat a young person like a criminal, the less likely he or she will be to feel and behave like a criminal.

In addition, DYS believes that its facilities should possess the following characteristics:

- *The focus on treatment should permeate all aspects of the facility—and at all times.* Under Missouri’s approach, treatment is a 24/7 activity. The focus on personal growth is constant, and any activity can be interrupted at any time if the need or opportunity arises to help one or more group members address an emotional need, correct an inappropriate behavior, or recognize a positive achievement. Further, Missouri believes that all staff—not just youth specialists and administrators, but also cooks, groundskeepers, secretaries—are treatment staff. All must understand and buy in to the agency’s rehabilitative mission, and in their interactions with youth they must demonstrate the same tone of respectfulness and high expectations.

**Every DYS facility is supported by a community liaison council of local leaders who participate in activities in the facility and help develop opportunities for the young people.**

- *The staff must be diverse in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity.* They should be selected in part to reflect the youth they serve, and to understand their cultural backgrounds. This diversity is made much easier in Missouri by the scattering of programs throughout the state, in urban as well as rural locations, close to the homes of the youth. (By contrast, diversity and cultural understanding can be difficult for states with large training schools, which are generally located in rural communities with majority white populations, serving a population that is predominantly youth of color and mostly urban.)
- *Facilities should be connected to the outside community.* As much as possible, DYS facilities strive to develop and maintain relationships with citizens, businesses, community organizations, and others in their local communities. These connections are invaluable both to create opportunities for youth during and after confinement, and to help youth develop a sense of themselves as contributors to the larger society. Every DYS facility is supported by a community liaison council of local leaders who participate in activities in the facility and help develop opportunities for the young people. Also, each DYS facility hosts frequent tours—led by the young people themselves—out of which ongoing relationships are often created that lead to service projects, job opportunities, and other learning opportunities for youth. These community ties are especially strong at the two DYS facilities (one for boys, one for girls) that are located on college campuses, and at facilities located in state parks where youth participate heavily in park maintenance and other projects with park rangers.
- *Facilities should be kept clean and orderly at all times—with youth themselves doing most of the work.* As part of its effort to help young people build their sense of discipline and self-respect, DYS places heavy emphasis on cleanliness and order. Every day, each group spends time straightening and vacuuming its pod (i.e., living area). Classrooms are straightened at the end of every school day. A handful of youth are assigned to help facility cooks clean up the kitchen after each meal. Youth participate in major spring cleanings, and they work with staff on landscaping and other projects to maintain and beautify their facilities—all part of an effort to communicate to youth that they are responsible for their own environment.

In addition to these specific characteristics—indeed more important than any specific trait or accoutrement—DYS believes that its facilities must revere and radiate an atmosphere of respectfulness. Perhaps the greatest need among troubled and delinquent teens—and the biggest key to change and success—is to discover their own sense of dignity and self-respect. Therefore, Missouri’s approach is always dignifying and never degrading; always respectful and never “because I told you so” or “because you’re bad.” DYS staff are trained and encouraged to treat youth (and their families) with respect at all times, to intervene whenever they sense any young person acting disrespectfully, and to teach youth that the more respect they show others, the more they will reap for themselves.

The Gentry Community Liaison Council: DYS Engages

# the community

As part of their efforts to build support and involve community residents in their work with troubled young people, each DYS facility recruits a team of community leaders to serve on a community liaison council.

At the 20-bed, moderate-security Gentry Residential Treatment Center in rural Southwest Missouri, the council includes county commissioners, ministers, business leaders, staff from law enforcement and the courts, legislators, and other concerned citizens. And it has proven particularly active—even incorporating itself as an independent nonprofit organization for the purpose of raising funds to support a series of new opportunities for Gentry youth, including:

- Providing start-up capital and ongoing fiscal management for a culinary arts business operated by Gentry residents. Funds raised by the business and the council's other fundraising activities support college scholarships and other opportunities for the students.
- Helping youth develop a community garden in conjunction with the University of Missouri Extension Service. Fresh produce from the garden supports a local food pantry for elderly individuals and families struggling with poverty.
- Constructing an adventure-based counseling “ropes course” for Gentry youth and other community residents on nearby land owned by a local church, with only \$400 support from the State of Missouri.
- Helping connect the Gentry facility to a regional Youth Conservation Corps operated in conjunction with the local Workforce Investment Board. A team of six young people from the facility are now working to restore wildlife habitats, create trails on conservation lands, and participate in other preservation projects.
- Organizing volunteer opportunities for young people to assist elderly members of the community with storm cleanup, property maintenance, and other needs.

Finally, the Gentry Community Liaison Council joins 6–7 other councils in the Southwest Missouri region annually for a Community Liaison Council Summit to share ideas and experiences about enriching the work and effectiveness of the region's DYS facilities. One outgrowth of these summits has been an annual golf tournament that raises several thousand dollars each year for college scholarships and other worthy causes.



## Organizational Essentials

The final set of core beliefs at DYS relates to the organizational characteristics necessary for the agency to deliver treatment effectively, and—most important—to sustain its sense of purpose year-in and year-out and continue achieving strong results for youth, citizens, and taxpayers.

In its work, DYS is guided by a cautionary belief that sustaining success requires ongoing vigilance to protect against what the agency terms “drift”—the gravitational pull toward more punitive approaches, and the ever-present distractions and disruptions that can cloud the agency’s focus on public safety and the well-being of troubled young people.

Another core belief is that beliefs alone are not enough: the organization must also develop and adhere to corresponding policies, practices, and supervisory structures to ensure that its everyday actions align with its beliefs and support its mission.

In many ways, the Missouri approach to juvenile corrections requires swimming against the current. Missouri’s methods challenge conventional wisdom and tough-on-crime political orthodoxy. They upset bureaucratic norms, and they demand constant creativity, commitment, and compassion from staff.

To succeed and continue succeeding in this against-the-tide challenge, DYS has tried to adopt the characteristics of a high-performance organization. Specifically, DYS leaders have made a conscious effort not only to embrace the following characteristics but also to embed them in the agency’s everyday practices:



Rehabilitative



Punitive

• **Mission focused.** The DYS treatment approach requires a strong and shared commitment to a common mission—from the top of the organization to the bottom—rooted in the belief that delinquent youth can succeed and the expectation that most will.

To keep the agency mission focused, DYS hires entry-level workers only after determining that they are personally committed and temperamentally suited to helping youth succeed, and it provides intensive and ongoing training to root them in the DYS treatment philosophy. Also, virtually all of the administrators at DYS have experience working directly with youth within the DYS system and deep appreciation for the DYS treatment model.

• **Highly motivated.** DYS must recruit highly motivated workers at all levels of the organization, and it must create an atmosphere that sustains and nourishes workers' motivation over time.

DYS has developed strong links to colleges and universities throughout the state, giving many interested students an opportunity to learn about the agency by hiring them to work part time as community-based mentors during their student years. Once hired on a permanent basis, DYS provides staff with many career advancement opportunities, allowing the most motivated and capable workers to advance from youth specialists to team leaders, facility managers or assistant managers, service coordinators, or—with additional training—family therapists. These advancement opportunities allow DYS to retain many of its most motivated workers for many years, despite a pay scale that is lower than those of youth corrections agencies in many other states.

• **Integrated.** DYS believes that all of its activities, and all of its services to youth, must be integrated into a coherent whole. Not only

must the right hand always know what the left hand is doing, the two hands must work together at all times to maximize the power of the DYS treatment experience for youth.

To operationalize its belief that treatment is a 24/7 activity, rather than something that transpires once or twice per week in a 90-minute therapy session, DYS has fully integrated its education and treatment activities by keeping treatment groups together during class time and placing a youth specialist in the classroom. Likewise, family therapy and any individual therapy offered to DYS youth are designed to support the group treatment process, rather than operating at cross purposes or on a separate track.

• **Decentralized.** In addition to keeping youth close to their homes and families, Missouri's regionalized program structure provides important organizational benefits. A decentralized administrative structure—and a willingness to allow the use of different approaches in different parts of the state—allows regional administrators (and individual facility managers) to exercise judgment and customize practices to the needs of their populations and the realities of their local communities.

Including clerical staff, fewer than 25 of the more than 1,400 workers on the DYS payroll statewide are based in the division's central office in Jefferson City, Missouri's capital. More than 70 work in the five DYS regional offices, and the regions are given considerable latitude to adapt the Missouri treatment model to local conditions and experiment with new practices—so long as all strategies are consistent with core DYS values and beliefs. At the facility level, too, DYS staff are permitted and encouraged to develop and try out new activities they think would benefit youth.

**“The law put her up here and thank God she got here ... this program has just absolutely turned her around ... I have my angel back.”**  
— Grandmother of DYS Student

- **Dedicated to continuous improvement.** In keeping with a “whatever it takes” philosophy to helping youth succeed, DYS encourages workers at all levels to identify gaps and opportunities, engage in creative problem-solving, and explore new approaches to improve services.

When staff grew concerned that too few parents were attending Sunday visiting hours in DYS facilities, they reached out to parents and learned that many worked on Sundays. To encourage visiting, DYS changed its visiting policy to allow visits on any day of the week. When DYS leaders grew concerned that daily treatment sessions were not being well run, it developed a new training and certification program for all group leaders statewide. When DYS noticed that parents weren’t attending family therapy due to transportation problems, it fought to change a rule that had previously prohibited DYS staff from transporting parents. When DYS leaders worried that DYS service coordinators were missing opportunities to place exiting youth into schools and jobs, it created a new performance measure tracking the percentage of youth who are employed or enrolled in school at the time of release. In all of these instances, and many others, DYS addresses problems by creating staff teams to look into issues, diagnose problems or weaknesses, and identify new opportunities to strengthen programming.

- **Engaged in the community.** To maximize the positive youth development activities it can provide youth through jobs, internships, community service activities, and other outings, DYS facility staff and regional administrators continually reach out to employers, civic organizations, local government officials, and other community residents.

As mentioned previously, every DYS facility conducts frequent youth-led tours to familiarize

community leaders with its mission and programs, and each facility maintains a local community liaison council to help identify community partners and recruit volunteers to host or participate in constructive activities with DYS youth. In addition to the opportunities for youth, the extensive community outreach by DYS also helps minimize any “not in my backyard” opposition to DYS facilities and to contain community reactions on those rare occasions when a young person runs away from a DYS facility or behaves poorly while out of the facility participating in a community activity.

- **Adept at cultivating support from key constituencies.** Because its treatment approach differs from conventional practice and defies tough-on crime orthodoxy, the Missouri model requires a deep and consistent well of political and judicial support. This support is particularly crucial when budget shortfalls arise, when the political mood on crime turns punitive, or when there is turnover in the top leadership of the division.

Particularly during the 17-year period (1988–2005) when DYS was overseen by former Director Mark Steward, DYS attracted strong support from top leaders in both political parties, many of whom served on the division’s active state advisory board. In many cases, these leaders committed to supporting DYS after touring one or more DYS facilities and hearing youth tell their stories and describe the progress they were making under DYS tutelage. DYS also cultivated support by bringing youth to testify before the state legislature, and to visit Missouri’s governor and other state leaders. The state advisory board has proved invaluable on several occasions, shielding DYS from proposed budget cuts or other proposals that might undercut its treatment programs.

The success of the DYS approach—indeed, the entire Missouri model—depends on helping troubled and chronically delinquent young people make deep and lasting changes in how they behave, think, view themselves, and foresee their futures.

“What is remarkable about Missouri’s system is that it has been sustained by conservative and liberal governments,” says Barry Krisberg, the president of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. “They’ve seen that this is not a left-right issue. In many ways, it’s a common-sense issue.”

Perhaps the DYS advisory board’s most important contribution came in the mid-1990s, at the height of the nation’s juvenile crime wave when many states were embracing “adult time for adult crime” statutes and other punitive measures. In Missouri, too, many state legislators were demanding similar changes. But working with the advisory group and with allies in the legislature and governor’s office, DYS was able to beat back the most draconian measures and keep its treatment approach intact. Rather than widespread transfers to criminal court, the legislature created the blended sentence alternative, which gives DYS the opportunity to retain custody and treat serious youth offenders—and to void adult prison sentences for those who respond well to DYS treatment.

DYS has also reaped great success in cultivating support from juvenile judges statewide. Few cases are transferred to adult court in Missouri, and judges have so far approved release of all youth in the blended sentence program who have successfully completed treatment. Also, judges continue to issue indeterminate sentences for four-fifths of the youth placed into DYS custody, allowing DYS the latitude to move youth in and out of correctional facilities as it sees fit, even though Missouri’s juvenile code allows judges to retain control over every aspect of the case through determinate sentencing.

In a 2006 report comparing the Missouri and Ohio juvenile corrections systems, the Ohio Department of Youth Services concluded that Missouri “does a fantastic job of involving legislators and interested community stakeholders as board members, and making the boards active and locally driven. Board members stay engaged both internally (participate in youth activities) and externally (ambassadors in the community and political arena).”<sup>28</sup>



## Conclusion



**Enriching**



**Degrading**

Over the past quarter century, Missouri has built a unique youth corrections model—an approach focused on fostering the personal growth of adjudicated youth in small, supportive facilities rather than punishment in large, harsh, prisonlike institutions. Utilizing this approach, Missouri is achieving noteworthy outcomes—results counted in large numbers of lives rescued, tax dollars saved, and crimes averted. For leaders in other states whose youth corrections systems are less impressive, the Missouri approach merits serious consideration.

However, Missouri’s intricate, multi-dimensional treatment approach has taken many years to evolve, and it involves many moving parts. The hard question for other states, then, is how to adopt the Missouri model—or to successfully adapt key elements from that model—in ways that improve outcomes substantially and cost-effectively in the near term.

According to Cynthia Osborne, an expert on youth development and public systems reform who has studied the Missouri youth corrections model intensively, the most important lessons for practitioners in other jurisdictions are that “no single idea, strategy, tool, or practice will help another system look like Missouri or achieve improved outcomes...[and that] transposing new practices into an unchanged system does not yield good results....” Rather, Osborne says, “the system must relinquish the traditional correctional values of punishment

and slowly grow a new system rooted in the values of treatment, compassion, and accountability. Practices cannot produce good results when used apart from the values.”

For any state interested in replicating the Missouri approach—as a whole or in part—the first essential step must be to embrace the mission of helping delinquent youth make meaningful and lasting behavioral changes and make it the agency’s central focus. States seeking to adopt the Missouri model must populate their youth correction agencies with leaders who believe in this mission and expect that all or most youth can and will succeed once changes are implemented. They must also cultivate support for this unconventional mission from key stakeholders (governors’ offices, legislators, judges) who have the power to support or stymie the changes necessary to adopt a Missouri-style approach.

In addition, states that are serious about embracing the Missouri approach will need early on to:

- Adopt a group-focused treatment process that keeps youth and staff together in small groups throughout the treatment process;
- Reject coercive methods for maintaining safety—no hardware, limited use of isolation—and rely instead upon a relationships-based approach enforced through 24/7 staff supervision;

- Redefine job descriptions and conduct intensive retraining so that all facility staff embrace a treatment role;
- Integrate education, therapy, and all other program elements into a unified treatment process;
- Implement an intensive and individualized case management system that assigns every young person to an individual case manager who will track his or her progress and advocate for his or her needs throughout the period of commitment; and
- Consider the possibility of closing training schools and replacing them with network of small, regionally dispersed treatment facilities along with a continuum of community-based treatment and supervision programs.

Over time, fully replicating the Missouri approach will require a four-part systems-change effort: (1) ensuring that everyone in the organization—and key allies as well—embrace the core values and beliefs; (2) operationalizing the core values through changes in facilities, staffing, treatment approach, and organizational structure; (3) protecting against internal drift through hiring, training, accountability procedures, and transparency; and (4) cultivating and sustaining external support from key constituencies in state government, courts, and communities.

The states of Louisiana and New Mexico, as well as the District of Columbia and Santa

**“The system must relinquish the traditional correctional values of punishment and slowly grow a new system rooted in the values of treatment, compassion, and accountability. Practices cannot produce good results when used apart from the values.”  
—Cynthia Osborne**



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Clara County, California, have begun to study and replicate the Missouri approach within their own juvenile justice systems. And fortunately, they are receiving substantial assistance from a nonprofit agency founded in 2005 to help export the Missouri approach to other jurisdictions. Run by the former longtime director of DYS, Mark Steward, the Missouri Youth Services Institute provides intensive training and consulting support to aid in replication. This aid, however, is available only to jurisdictions that demonstrate a strong commitment to enacting Missouri-style reforms. “We don’t want places touting Missouri approaches unless they actually mean to use them,” Steward says.

Even in jurisdictions where the Missouri Youth Services Institute is providing assistance, the change process is painstaking, and progress is sometimes slow. Yet, in an era when major abuse

scandals have erupted in California, Texas, New York, Ohio, Florida, and many other states, and when recidivism and failure remain the norm in juvenile corrections nationwide, the Missouri model stands out as an attractive alternative well worth pursuing.

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