



Delinquency Detour

Treating mental illness in young people can keep them from a future of crime and delinquency.

BY SARAH HAMMOND

As many as 70 percent of youths in juvenile justice systems have some kind of mental disorder, according to Joseph J. Cocozza, director of the National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice. One in five suffers from a mental illness so severe that it impairs their ability to function as a young person and grow into a responsible adult.

Young people can have conduct, mood, anxiety and substance abuse disorders. Sometimes illness from substance abuse “co-occurs” with another mental illness. Such disorders often lead to troublesome behavior and delinquent acts.

Without treatment, these young people continue in delinquency and often become adult criminals. The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that more than three-quarters of the mentally ill offenders in jail had prior offenses. Effective assessment and comprehensive responses to court-involved juveniles with mental health needs is necessary to help break this cycle and provide for healthier young people who are less likely to commit crimes, Cocozza says.

Mental health disorders are more complicated and difficult to treat in young people than in adults because of the physical and mental changes taking place in adolescence. Ongoing assessment and treatment are important.

WASHINGTON'S EFFORT

Washington helps young offenders with mental illnesses through a law legislators passed in 2005, committing \$46 million to improving mental health services for both adults and kids in the criminal justice system. Some of that money replaced losses in federal funds, says Senator James Hargrove, lead sponsor of the omnibus mental health act

Sarah Hammond specializes in juvenile justice and victims' issues for NCSL.



and chair of the Senate Human Services and Corrections Committee. The money supports policy to get tough on crime by preventing crime and delinquency, he says. Lawmakers were motivated by prevention, the major impetus for the legislation.

“Prevention is the key,” Hargrove says. “If we give juveniles appropriate treatment, then we can keep kids out of criminal justice systems down the road. This saves a lot of money for taxpayers and it saves victims.”

The legislation authorizes counties to levy a 0.1 cent sales tax for therapeutic courts and mental health and chemical dependency treatment. To date, four counties have implemented the tax.

The state is using these specialized courts to serve young people as well as adults with mental health needs. The King County Treatment Court in Seattle operates with involvement by the departments of mental health and substance abuse, the probation department and the juvenile court. Services focus on youths with a psychiatric disorder and a



SENATOR
JAMES HARGROVE
WASHINGTON

substance abuse problem, who are likely to re-offend. Juveniles are screened when arrested and receive individual and family therapy and substance abuse intervention. The screening and assessment process gives court officials important information that can be used to consider all other options for kids with mental illnesses who are in trouble with the law.

AROUND THE COUNTRY

The Juvenile Court Clinic in Cook County, Ill., created a comprehensive screening process for juveniles that is being put to use across the state. Nevada and California now require an intensive screening of juveniles taken into custody to determine their mental health. And Mississippi has shifted away from incarceration for adolescent offenders by using local mental health organizations to provide academic, literacy and vocational training as well as mentoring programs.

Many states are moving toward programs that require juvenile justice systems to work with mental health agencies when dealing with juveniles. California, Colorado and West Virginia all have such programs. West Virginia's program involves treatment teams made up of juvenile probation officers, social workers, parents, guardians, attorneys, school officials and child advocacy representatives.

WORKING TOGETHER

What all of these efforts have in common is the belief that when systems work together to treat juveniles with mental health needs, the result will be better for kids and society.

“You have to change the culture of government services,” says Chief Judge Patricia Clark of the Juvenile Division of the King County, Washington Superior Court.

“We need an integrated, child-serving system, not a juvenile justice system alongside a child welfare system, alongside a system for providing health services.”