

## **Child Watch® Column**

### **Juvenile Justice Reform: Making the “Missouri Model” an American Model**

**By Marian Wright Edelman**

The state of Missouri has created a juvenile justice system that has proved so successful over the last thirty years it's known as the “Missouri Miracle.” A number of practices combine to make Missouri's system unique: It's primarily made up of small facilities, generally designed for between ten and thirty youths, located at sites throughout the state that keep young people close to their own homes. These facilities don't look like jails with traditional cells; there are only eight isolation rooms in the entire state, which are seldom used and only for emergency situations. They feature a highly trained and educated staff working in teams with small groups of youths. Youths are treated with respect and dignity, and instead of more traditional correctional approaches, the system uses a rehabilitative and therapeutic model that works towards teaching the young people to make positive, lasting changes in their behavior. The result has been some of the best outcomes in the nation: fewer than 8% of the youths in the Missouri system return again after their release, and fewer than 8% go on to adult prison. One-third of the youths return to their communities with a high school diploma or GED, and another 50% successfully return to school.

Missouri's results have been so positive that Mark Steward, the visionary former director of the Missouri Division of Youth Services, founded the Missouri Youth Services Institute (MYSI) to help other jurisdictions across the country do what Missouri has done. But even with the proven success of the Missouri model, a set of myths persists implying that Missouri is somehow different from every other state and that its results can't be replicated. It's time to

debunk those myths and for all states to stop making excuses and start doing the right thing for children.

One of the most persistent myths is that Missouri's children themselves are different. One common assumption is that Missouri's young offenders are mostly rural White teenagers with minor infractions who are just more responsive to rehabilitation than the youths in other juvenile justice systems. But in reality, many of the young people in Missouri's juvenile justice system are from St. Louis and Kansas City, both major urban centers with the same racial diversity, stresses, and kinds of crime as urban areas in other states. St. Louis's homicide rates are among the nation's highest. A second myth is that Missouri actually sends its toughest youth offenders to prison, so that only "lightweights" with less serious offenses are being served through the juvenile justice system. In fact, the one prison facility Missouri operates for youths under age 17 is now empty and has been for some time, and has rarely served more than five youths a year. Most of the state's young offenders are indeed being served through the juvenile justice system, and youths with all kinds of records are treated with the same emphasis on respect and rehabilitation.

A third myth is that Missouri's juvenile justice system doesn't serve children with mental health problems, and that those youths, who often have a very serious set of challenges and needs, are being housed and treated elsewhere. This also is not true. In the past, the state did arrange for separate treatment for a small number of youths with mental health needs, but even that is no longer true. Today virtually all mental health needs of youths committed to the Division of Youth Services are served through the juvenile justice system. Other myths are that Missouri's juvenile justice system only keeps young people for a short amount of time, or that it only serves younger children and teens, so that older teenagers with more serious crimes are handled in the adult prison system. In fact, it serves youths up to age 18, and provides

a continuum of care upwards that includes a dual sentencing program for youths who have committed the most serious crimes that allows them to remain in the juvenile justice system until age 21.

All these misconceptions add up to the big overall myth that says the Missouri model may work for Missouri, but that there are too many variables for it to be successfully replicated elsewhere. This is the most important myth to debunk because the Missouri model is already being studied and replicated successfully in other cities and states including Washington, D.C.; San Jose, California; New Mexico; and Louisiana.

One of the most persistent roadblocks to juvenile justice reform across the country is resistance to change. Too many officials cling to the belief that citizens think existing punitive juvenile systems with facilities and cultures that resemble adult prisons are “where these kids deserve to be.” But when you ask people whether they want young people who have gone through the juvenile justice system to come out better or worse at the end, the answer is clear. They understand that abusive and punitive approaches often lead youths to the adult criminal system. New York State’s abusive youth prisons have an 89 percent recidivism rate for boys and cost \$210,000 a youth – a one-year equivalent of 4 years at Harvard – to produce an adult criminal.

Statistics already show Missouri is one of the few states achieving this goal. We need a system that returns young people to the community prepared to succeed and become productive adults to serve as a model for the entire nation. We don’t need systems that do further harm and return youths, most of them nonviolent offenders, back to their communities hopeless, angry, and unprepared to succeed in life.

*Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund and its Action Council whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe*

Start *and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.* For more information go to [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org).

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