

To Keep Kids Out of the System, We Need Community Involvement



Most of the teenagers walking into my courtroom were 1st or 2nd time visitors. They didn't want to return, and we worked with them and their parents to make that first visit their last one.

However, some kids need more support and intervention to change their life trajectories from negative to positive.

After seeing the same teens in court year after year, judges wonder what it will take to change the behaviors that keep bringing them back into court. Short of sending a youth off to a state prison, the options usually available to juvenile court judges include stern lectures and warnings, mandated community service, assessment and rehabilitative services, and electronic monitoring.

Sometimes judges reach a point where everything has been tried at least once, and yet the youth is again back in court with a new offense. When that happens, will the judge leave the youth with his or her family and try for rehabilitation again? Or will the judge think "been there, done that" and send the youth to incarceration far from home?

Sending any young person to prison can't be equated with

sending your troubles away forever. They always return. And when they do, they go right back into the same home environment, same community, and same group of friends or gang.

A few months or even years in a juvenile prison rarely improve behaviors. Unless something has changed at home, chances are that juvenile will be back in court or will age into the adult courts.

Incarceration is an option whenever the teen poses a threat to public safety or his own safety. Otherwise, rehabilitative services are worth repeated attempts. They are far less expensive than prison and are more effective.

While every situation is different, families always are key to keeping sons and daughters out of trouble.

The youth brought repeatedly to juvenile court often have parents who had been in either the juvenile or adult system – or both. Judges, especially in rural areas like my own, come across generations of families in courtrooms. One or more family members appear in child welfare cases, domestic violence situations, small claims court and every nook and cranny of the courthouse.

Because these families are involved in both the child welfare system and the justice system, we should involve both systems in solutions. Bringing community-based services to an entire family, can help parents communicate with their children to resolve arguments and use appropriate discipline to address behavior problems. When social services involve the youth's entire family, other children in the home benefit as well, and we sometimes can prevent siblings from following the same path into the juvenile justice system.

Early investment in prevention and assistance, such as mental health counseling and treatment for drug addictions, can pay dividends for many years into the future. Breaking a family's

cycle of juvenile and adult crime is an obvious benefit to public safety, but it also means those youth become productive citizens less likely to need other assistance or return again and again to expensive adult prisons.

In Illinois, we're beginning to apply those same lessons to the most challenging kids and families, through Redeploy Illinois, which keeps kids out of state prisons, and through innovative aftercare programming for youth who do pass through those youth prisons.

In 2011, the [Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice](#) (IDJJ) piloted an aftercare program for youth entering prison from Cook County, our state's largest county. By assigning specially trained aftercare specialists to work directly with youth and their families from the day they first enter prison until they leave and the months beyond, we can better prepare those youth to follow the law and continue in school.

This promising approach works with kids and families to plan for a safe and successful return home and to build support and strengths to keep kids in the community and out of costly and ineffective prisons. It's showing positive impact and is rightly being expanded across the state.

To complement IDJJ's aftercare specialists, the [Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission](#) (IJJC) funded a youth aftercare series pilot project partnering with well established non-profit family service agencies to give added services to youth returning to some of the state's toughest neighborhoods in Chicago and the East St. Louis region –communities sending the largest number of youth to the state's juvenile prisons.

Using \$1.5 million in federal funds, the Commission's aftercare projects test the impact of intense, family-focused community services and support in keeping kids at home and out of prison.

Together, these projects are developing replicable models for

working with young people at the “deep end” of the justice system.

These responses are even more successful when others in the community work with the juvenile justice system to reach teens in trouble. When service providers, including those outside the justice system, like faith-based organizations and schools, are trying to help the same family and can collaborate, they can create an integrated and powerful response. Communities must come together to save our children.

Whether in prison or not, we can't give up on any young people. With the right supervision, support and services, all are capable of change and growth.

For the Newly-Elected Judge, a Different View of Juvenile Court



Dozens of lawyers won their first elections as judges this month, and they will soon experience the sensation of viewing the courtroom from the other side of the bench and hearing the words “your honor” directed at them.

In about half the states, including my home state of Illinois, voters elect some or all trial court judges, sometimes after rough-and-tumble campaigns making them household names. These new judges may not have given it much thought, but many of them will begin their judicial service largely out of the public view. They're not going to preside over headline-grabbing murder trials or referee disputes involving multi-million dollar lawsuits.

Many of the judges-elect, instead, will preside over juvenile court, the one courtroom in most jurisdictions where the public and press are not welcome and a good number of the accused aren't old enough to shave.

Why do so many new judges begin their careers in juvenile court?

Once elected or appointed to the bench in Illinois, the local Chief Judge assigns a judge to a particular caseload or call. Often, the Chief Judge assigns new judges to juvenile court duties precisely because it is out of the spotlight. It's a good place for a first-time judge to hone listening skills and to learn how to manage a courtroom. Some judges are eager to get juvenile court behind them and move on to adult trials. Others, like me, maintain a connection to juvenile court throughout their careers.

My own judicial career began in 1984 in a small Illinois county closer to Kentucky than Chicago. I handled every matter, from juvenile to traffic court, from shoplifting to felony cases. Nearly two dozen years later when I retired as Chief Judge of [Illinois' Second Judicial Circuit](#), I still was presiding over juvenile court. Like many other judges, I had discovered the challenges and rewards of presiding over juvenile trials, and I felt it was important to maintain that connection.

Juvenile court has its share of frustrations and heartbreak

but also the potential for great reward, especially in a small community like mine where you see the same teenagers grow into men and women and begin to raise their own families. Of course, not all live “happily ever after” and instead spend their lives going in and out of adult prisons.

Many times I would go home after a day in juvenile court and think over and over again about the young people who had been in my courtroom and too often wished I could have ordered an alternative short of a juvenile prison. Even though juvenile court judges have a wide range of options, the best match for the crime and the teen isn't always available, especially in rural jurisdictions where public funds are limited and not all therapies are offered.

Even if the child's crimes were not violent, prison sometimes was the only way the child might find the counseling and therapies to change that behavior. But rehabilitation in prison was no guarantee, did not involve families and put the youth in contact with some of the state's most violent and troubled teenagers.

Fortunately, that lack of options began to change my last year on the bench.

The counties in my circuit were chosen to be one of the four pilot sites for a new state program, [Redeploy Illinois](#). In exchange for our promise to send fewer young people to the state prison system, Redeploy Illinois provided funding we needed to reach our youth before their behaviors worsened. The local stakeholders – judges, prosecutors, public defenders, law enforcement, and many other community leaders – work together on the program.

Redeploy Illinois has made it possible to assess and screen all youth referred by the court or probation officers. Once we know what services are appropriate to meet each youth's needs, they attend therapy sessions, sometimes in their homes and

they are sent to residential mental health or substance abuse treatment when necessary.

The Redeploy Illinois program requires participating counties to agree to reduce commitments to juvenile prison by 25 percent in exchange for new state funds for local youth services. Statewide, the Redeploy counties have reduced commitments by 51 percent – more than doubling the target and allowing the state to avert more than \$40 million in potential incarceration costs. The results in my Second Judicial Circuit mirror the statewide results. Since 2005, we have reduced eligible commitments by 51 percent and provided services to more than 600 youth in our circuit.

Of course, we're not the only state to have grasped the cost effectiveness and rehabilitation success of state funding for such local services. The piloting of Redeploy Illinois was based in part on the [RECLAIM Ohio program](#), and financial crises have caused additional states to offer help to divert young non-violent offenders from expensive prisons where rehabilitation too often is an afterthought.

Unfortunately not every county has access to Redeploy Illinois services yet. But the proven cost effectiveness should help convince state leaders to expand the program. If that happens, many of those incoming juvenile court judges will one day want to pull senior rank and remain in juvenile courtrooms.