

International Group Hails Florida Juvenile Justice Reformer



Wansley Walters. Photo courtesy of the International Juvenile Justice Observatory.

The woman driving the [Florida Juvenile Justice Department](#) toward a goal of “system excellence” is a 2012 winner of an international award that recognizes commitment to children’s justice.

“We’re trying to do a complete paradigm shift,” said Wansley Walters, Secretary of the Florida DJJ and one of eight recipients of the 2012 Juvenile Justice Without Borders International Award, presented by the [International Juvenile Justice Observatory](#), a Belgium-based international organization that works in conjunction with the United Nations, the European Union and other groups.

“We’re trying to be proactive, not reactive,” she said.

Walters came to the DJJ nearly two years ago from the [Miami-Dade County Juvenile Services Department](#). There she pushed to keep most kids in treatment or diversion programs, leaving secure beds and police records only for the most serious,

risky offenders.

That program attracted observers from as far away as Thailand, who used some of Miami's principles in their own national juvenile justice reforms. Indeed, Thailand's national agency in charge of juvenile justice won an IJJ0 award as well.

Other winners of the biennial prize include activists and researchers based in Europe and Africa. An honorary award was given to Georges Loinger, a Jewish teacher during World War II who escaped from Nazi captivity and smuggled hundreds of Jewish youngsters into safety in Switzerland.

They received the awards at the 2012 International Youth Justice Convention in London earlier this month. Afterward, Walters returned to the road in Florida, promoting, publicizing and explaining the department's "[Roadmap to System Excellence](#)," a just-published set of policies and programs aimed at making the state a national model for juvenile justice.

"When you have a child who's committed a minor offense, that does not mean that he's a minor offender," said Walters on Nov. 27, ahead of a Gainesville, Fla., town hall meeting about the map. "Nor does it mean that he does not have some significant risk factors."

So when a child commits some offense, it is key, she said, to screen and assess that child as early in the process as possible and send him to the right follow-up.

"You may have three shoplifters, [who] have three entirely different scenarios behind them," she gave as an example. One may have made a stupid mistake and does not need a lot of resources to keep him out of trouble. Another might be a substance abuser who will straighten up with treatment. The third could be acting out due to abuse at home and needs a completely different set of services.

Figuring out those scenarios early gives law enforcement a chance to use their resources strategically, she explained.

That philosophy matches with London conference presentations. "Research on adolescent brain development has led to a widespread acknowledgement that youth are different from adults, and so should be given treatment rather than punishment – again, particularly in the case of low-level juvenile offenders," Elizabeth Clarke, president of the Juvenile Justice Initiative in Illinois, told the crowd in London.

Walters also said she finds that juvenile justice "is a very socio-economic system. The kind of system you experience depends on the family you come from."

Some children have many supportive adults who can offer them shelter, or who have money, or who can give them a ride to court. Others get sent to juvenile hall because they are charged with misdemeanor domestic violence and have no other relative to stay with, or get a contempt citation just because there's no way to get to the courthouse.

Programs starting up now aim to fill those gaps by making rides available and setting up "cooling-off" shelters with family intervention services for children accused solely of misdemeanor domestic abuse.

By 2014, Walters plans to present the state Legislature with a package of legal changes that will help pave the road to system excellence.

"We've been using detention as a catchall. It's expensive and it's damaging and it should only be used for a child that represents a threat to public safety," she said.

The IJJ0 Conference and International Youth Justice Convention was held to "provide valuable and practical international perspectives on developments in juvenile justice," said

organizing committee Chair Malcolm Stevens in a written statement.