

## **New Law Makes Alabama Model for Juvenile Reform**

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**By Linda Tilly**

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Hindsight may be 20/20, but in this case, foresight is priceless.

For the first time this fall, Alabama begins a new, proven approach to dealing with low-risk juvenile offenders. During the 2008 regular session of the Alabama legislature, lawmakers got it right when they passed new legislation to transform the state's juvenile justice system. The Alabama Juvenile Justice Act begins to repair the damage done over the last two decades by the state's approach to juveniles. Key provisions of the act went into effect October 1<sup>st</sup>.

In the 1980s and 1990s, stricter juvenile codes were established, throwing nearly every teenaged lawbreaker into detention facilities. Instead of separating the good from the bad or the non-violent, low-risk children from the violent offenders, judges sent nearly all to Department of Youth Services (DYS) institutions. For children locked up for truancy violations, shoplifting or other non-violent offenses, heading off to DYS meant going to "crime school." Decades of research shows that incarceration is damaging to children. Non-violent kids pick up bad habits, bad ideas, and bad connections from their more violent inmates increasing their chances of committing future crimes. Locking up non-violent with violent children provides networking of which society does not need.

Thanks to the foresight of the state legislature, non-violent children are being handled more appropriately by the court system. Judges and court officials are now required to choose more appropriate community-based sanctions and methods to handle non-violent offenders based on assessments. A child who presents a true threat to the community will still be institutionalized, but those who do not will be treated differently. Alternative sentences will strive to identify and address the underlying sources of delinquency. Causes may include mental health challenges, abuse and neglect, or learning disabilities.

In an effort to chart the progress of the new law, VOICES for Alabama's Children presented in its *2008 Alabama Kids Count Data Book* data on the number of youth committed to DYS. The Kids Count numbers are broken down county- by- county to give policymakers and community leaders a benchmark for gauging success of the new approach. Numbers in Jefferson, St. Clair, Shelby, and Walker Counties, for example, showed a total of 564 children committed to juvenile detention centers. Of that number 8 out of 10 were non-violent offenders. Under the provision of the new law we should expect these numbers to decrease dramatically.

Changing the county commitment numbers and ultimately the focus of juvenile justice in Alabama is what the new legislation is all about. Ultimately, successful community-based programs will enable our

non-violent youth to live healthy, law abiding lives while we all move forward in a stronger and safer Alabama.

*(Linda Tilly is the executive director of VOICES for Alabama's Children, a nonpartisan non-profit organization committed to improving child well-being in the state. This is the first of four articles in a series on juvenile justice.)*