

Morgan County: Leading By Example

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By Linda Tilly

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Alabama is shifting to a more progressive, research-based approach to try and stem the flow of juvenile offenders maturing into members of the state's adult prison population. And if Morgan County is any example, the shift is producing results.

As part of the Juvenile Justice Reform Act passed by the Alabama legislature last year, counties are taking a systemic look at a child's background, challenges and offense and prescribing appropriate treatment. That means instead of being sent directly to lockups, judges and court personnel are assessing the whole child before disposition. Violent and dangerous juveniles still head to state detention facilities as public safety remains of paramount concern in the new plan. The difference comes with treatment for the majority of offenders---the low- risk children. These non-violent offenders are kept at home in their communities where they receive the services they need to address cores issues and problems.

It's a win for both the state and the child.

Young offenders in community-based programs show consistently better outcomes than do those who are incarcerated, at a far lower cost to society. But we are just getting started. Court ordered counseling and therapy for non-violent juveniles is new for most county judges and court officials with a few notable exceptions.

Morgan County has been the vanguard of reform, revising its approach to juvenile justice in favor of prevention and rehabilitation years before the current legislation was passed. Called by Governor Riley "the model for Alabama" Morgan County has developed System of Services (SOS), corrections- based juvenile resource center---a kind of one-stop shop for juvenile justice needs. The center offers a wide array of services that have successfully reduced the number of kids sent to the Department of Youth Services (DYS). Services include anger management, mental health and substance abuse counseling, parenting classes, character building and vocational services.

And here's an added bonus: crime is down in Morgan County. The combined adult and juvenile per capita violent crime rate is 47% less than the state's average.

Thanks to these innovative services and policies, Morgan County is reducing the number of low-level young offenders who are sent to state run detention facilities. In 1994, Morgan County sent 104 kids to the DYS. This year, county officials estimate they will send 25 or fewer. When it comes to recidivism, research shows that community based programs are more effective than incarceration or boot camps.

Retired Family Court Judge David Breland is one of the founding fathers of the Morgan County Resource Center. Current Morgan County judges Waters, Langham and Craig now serve as advisors to the SOS board. Under the direction of Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb, Judge Breland has gone on to direct, inspire and mentor leaders in counties around Alabama who are transitioning to the new approach.

Breland advocates the importance of local Children's Policy Councils (CPC) in resource development for juvenile courts. He cites Lauderdale County as a top example. Having Kiwanis Club members, vocational rehabilitation workers, health care workers, child advocates, and more than 100 other varied members, the Lauderdale Children's Policy Council is a melting pot of collaboration. Led by Judge Jimmy Sandlin, the council has been the impetus for many new programs benefiting juveniles and their families.

The Lauderdale CPC has taken an old school and turned it into offices for various community organizations, many that directly work with juvenile offenders. Meeting at the "water cooler" has produced unlikely alliances. Recently, the directors of two of the tenants, Habitat for Humanity and the Colbert/Lauderdale Attention Homes, bumped into each other in the break room. The Attention Homes' director mentioned that the boys' and girls' homes were very old and in need of constant repair. As a result, Habitat has committed to build two new homes and has influenced a local church to donate the land for the boys' home. These two organizations have been in existence for decades---now they are partners.

Alabama is off to a good start. The reforms are already having impact. Fewer children are being detained in state operated facilities. Youngsters living on the edge are being offered rehabilitating services often for the first time in their lives, giving hope to families and promise to our communities. A reduction in juvenile crime today means a reduction in adult offenses tomorrow, and that's good for all of us.

(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 last of four articles in a series on juvenile justice.)