

## “Working Together on Juvenile Detention”

Guest column by Melanie Ford, St. Louis County Attorney

Originally printed in abbreviated form in Mesabi Daily News - September, 2009

A group of kids is hanging out at a street corner after curfew, holding beer bottles. A police officer drives by and activates the lights, and the kids drop the bottles and run. One girl is picked up. She has an attitude and won't reveal her name, but when the police take her to the station, she gives up her identity. The girl is cited for curfew violation, fleeing, and underage consumption. When the officer calls her house, her parent says that if she comes home she will be kicked out of the house “so quick she won't know what hit her.” Should the girl be taken into detention because there is risk of harm from her own family?

A deputy picks up a boy for assaulting another boy with a baseball bat. The victim is seriously injured and hospitalized. The deputy calls the perpetrator's parents, who are respected business owners with many ties to the community. They want their son home and assure the deputy they will get him to court. Should he instead be detained as a threat to public safety? And would the decision be affected if he lived in a less affluent neighborhood to which the deputy had been called frequently in response to neighbor complaints about the boy's parents?

And, finally, consider this: A probation officer has a client who is on probation for truancy, has been skipping school, and cannot be located. After the youth's second failure to appear in court, the probation officer locates the girl and gets a judge to issue a pickup warrant. Should the probation officer take her to detention because of her history of not showing up for court?

The law allows detention of children between 10 and 18 years of age for three reasons: to protect the child from harm, to safeguard public safety, or to ensure the child's appearance in court. Still, studies from across the country show that putting more children in detention does not decrease juvenile crime. In fact, kids have a better chance of changing their behaviors and becoming successful adults when the consequences for those behaviors occur in a supportive home or home-like setting. There are unquestionably still cases, though, in which secure detention is the only option.

My office is leading efforts to ensure that when it comes to juvenile issues, the right kids are in the right place and for the right reasons. To accomplish that goal, we've founded the St. Louis County Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), through funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Office of Justice Programs, along with community and government partnerships. We're confident that, through these efforts, we can help our children grow up to reinvest in our communities, save taxpayers money, and reduce crime.

One goal of the JDAI is to define, as a community, when it's appropriate to detain children in our regional Arrowhead Juvenile Corrections (AJC) center and what alternatives exist or should be created for those kids who don't meet detention criteria. Another goal is to reduce the disproportionate number of youth of color who are detained at AJC.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has helped over 100 juvenile justice jurisdictions around the country look at why kids are being detained, especially kids of color, who across the nation are detained at a far greater rate than white youth. The Foundation also helps communities determine what environment is best for helping youth in trouble change their behaviors. In places that have undertaken JDAI, juvenile crime is significantly decreased, as is the number of children of color in detention.

We've begun by gathering baseline data about the children who become involved in our juvenile justice system: where they live, their race or ethnicity and country of origin, how they came into contact with the system (school, law enforcement, or social services), their infraction, whether and how long they were detained before the Court issued a final order, whether they were found to be delinquent, what the sentence was, and whether they reoffended. Our partnership is also developing a County "statement of purpose" for how the County uses and views detention and a "risk assessment tool" to help law enforcement and others determine whether a child should be detained. We are also determining what we can do to create more alternatives to detention and are analyzing past decisions regarding detention through a racial lens.

To be successful, we need the help of all those who work with youth. Input from faith-based groups, schools, parents, youth service agencies, and others can help us make the best decisions. For more information, please call my office (218-726-2323) and ask for Sue Lawson or myself.

By working together, we can save taxpayers money, reduce crime, and build a better future for our children and our communities.

*Melanie Ford is the St. Louis County Attorney*