



Casey foundation promotes alternatives

## Less youth detention means more savings, better families

By TOM MORTON - Star-Tribune staff writer | Posted: Sunday, January 24, 2010 12:00 am

Wyoming taxpayers would save money, streets would be safer, families would be stronger, youth would be better educated and more successful, and the justice system would work more smoothly.

All for one low price: change policies to quit putting so many kids in jail.

However, that idea runs counter to the longstanding belief that locking them up will scare them straight, said Bart Lubow, program director for the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI).

"Juvenile detention in most jurisdictions is not driven by juvenile crime, but by policies," Lubow said.

Lubow told law enforcement and community officials last week in Casper about the 18-year-old program implemented in more than 100 counties and states that has reduced crime rates, saved millions of dollars and reduced the racial disparities in juvenile justice.

"Youth involved in the juvenile justice system should have opportunities to develop into healthy, productive adults," Lubow said.

The Wyoming Department of Family Services has been encouraging the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, its Director Tony Lewis said.

More incarceration means higher recidivism -- return to criminal behavior -- and less education resulting in less success in life, he said.

DFS spends \$24 million a year on juvenile detention-related matters, but only \$3 million on community services, Lewis said.

Many counties do not coordinate their juvenile justice methods, although he pointed to Natrona County as an example of where its law enforcement and justice system offer assistance to youth on the circuit court level, he said.

Natrona County's new juvenile detention center, which will replace the inadequate facility on the third floor of the Hall of Justice, also indicates a willingness to improve its treatment of youth, Lewis said.

Natrona County Assistant District Attorney Brian Christensen said his office has been pursuing some of these goals through risk assessments to determine whether a child should be placed in detention, and incarcerating fewer youth for misdemeanors.

The Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, Lubow said, developed from the work of the Baltimore Annie E. Casey Foundation.

In the 1940s, UPS founder Jim Casey saw his best employees came from strong families. Casey and his family created the foundation -- named for their mother -- to work with youth.

The foundation publishes the annual "Kids Count" report of youth wellness. In recent years, those reports have shown Wyoming has one of the highest rates of jailing children for minor offenses.

The foundation, Lubow said, decided to focus on juvenile detention, in part because nobody else did, Lubow said.

The JDAI relies on data instead of gut hunches to develop its programs, starting with "juvenile delinquency" itself, he said.

Most children will break the law -- misdemeanors such as underage drinking and smoking -- while they're growing up, he said. "This is not to say it's OK."

Most children grow out of delinquent behavior when they take on the responsibilities of work and families, he said.

But that trend changes dramatically and destructively if they are arrested, detained, prosecuted and then found guilty of being a delinquent, Lubow said.

In the long run, those youth-turned-adults will have less education, less income, less success -- and be more likely to become criminals, he said.

The Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative offers communities a way to reverse this trend through a program of collaboration among juvenile justice agencies, government and community organizations; the use of accurate data to identify problems and solutions; objective and consistent criteria to determine whether a child should be placed in custody; alternatives to detention such as community service; faster processing of cases; reducing confinement for minor cases such as probation violation; a commitment to reduce racial disparities; and improvement of detention conditions.

The program does not grant any leeway for those juveniles who are charged with serious felonies, Lubow said. "We wouldn't be in this if we thought it would affect public safety."

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