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Missouri System Treats Juvenile Offenders With Lighter Hand
By SOLOMON MOORE

ST. LOUIS, Mo. — VonErrick celebrated his 14th birthday last year by committing a daylight carjacking, beating the driver to the ground. With a long record of truancy, assault, and breaking and entering, he was sent to a state group home — the same home that his two older brothers passed through after their own scrapes with the law.

Both of those brothers are out now. Tory, 16, has A grades and plans to attend college. Terry, 20, has a job and has had a clean record for four years. VonErrick was recently released and immediately started high school.

The brothers say they benefited from confinement in the Missouri juvenile system, which emphasizes rehabilitation in small groups, constant therapeutic interventions and minimal force.

Juvenile justice experts across the nation say that the approach, known as the Missouri Model, is one of several promising reform movements that strapped states are trying to reduce the costly confinement of youths. California, which spends more than \$200,000 a year on each incarcerated juvenile, reallocated \$93 million in prison expenses by reducing state confinement.

There is no barbed wire around facilities like Missouri Hills, on the outskirts of St. Louis. No more than 10 youths and 2 adults called facilitators live in cottage-style dormitories in a wooded setting, a far cry from the quasi penitentiaries in other states. When someone becomes unruly, the other youths are trained to talk him down. Perhaps most impressive, Missouri has one of the lowest recidivism rates in the country.

Other states, including Florida, Illinois and Louisiana, have moved in a similar direction, focusing on improving conditions at state facilities to keep young offenders from returning.

Some states have worked at the county level to avoid confinement altogether, keeping youths in their communities while they receive rehabilitative services, which advocates say is a cheaper alternative to residential care.

The two largest state systems, Texas and California, cut long-term youth confinement by requiring counties to house low-level offenders in detention halls. Texas cut its 5,000-youth population by half within two years, while California reduced its population to 2,500, from more than 10,000 in 1997. But critics say that city and county detention programs are uneven and point out that states often do a poor job of monitoring them.

Missouri and other states are using new approaches in the juvenile justice system to try to stem the flow of adults behind bars. Missouri managed to cut its adult population from 2005 through the first half of 2007 by applying techniques from the Missouri Model.

The reforms have begun to have a national impact, with a 12 percent decrease in juvenile offenders from 1997 to 2006, from 105,000 youths to 93,000.

Most of the decline during that period was in state confinements, although some of the decrease is attributed to a 28 percent decline in youth arrests, which reform advocates say proves that there is no detriment associated with fewer incarcerated juveniles.

The Anne E. Casey Foundation of Baltimore has been a leading advocate for ending the confinement of low-risk offenders and placing them in community programs. Since trying the foundation's approach in 2003, five counties in New Jersey have reduced juvenile detention by 42 percent, to 288 youths from 499.

Three years ago in California, Scott MacDonald, who is in charge of probation in Santa Cruz County, began asking courts to use Casey Foundation methods. Instead of confining every gang member accused of a crime, or every juvenile who failed a drug test, judges now look at a youth's record and risk to determine whether he should remain free. A youth who fails a drug test, for example, might be ordered to attend substance abuse classes.

“Even if a kid doesn’t follow all of the rules — particularly rules that have nothing to do with crime — we won’t necessarily detain him,” Mr. MacDonald said.

In the 1990s, the Santa Cruz juvenile hall averaged 50 to 60 youths. Now it averages about 20 detainees, most of them under community supervision. More than 90 percent of those in the community programs have not committed new crimes within three years, Mr. McDonald said.

“The question we’re always starting with is, How do we keep them home?” he said.

Isela Gutierrez, a juvenile justice expert with the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, a nonprofit group, said one drawback to the Missouri state system was that too many low-level offenders there were being confined, while serious juvenile felons were being sent to adult prisons, where conditions are harsher.

Tim Decker, director of the Missouri Division of Youth Services, said judges preferred to send youths to state facilities — Missouri Hills or the Hogan Street Regional Youth Center, with dorms that have wooden beds, male health and wellness classes, group counseling and game rooms — rather than dismal county lockups or to backlogged community programs.

“Judges have more faith in us,” Mr. Decker said. “So far we’re O.K., but you can’t do what we do with 25 kids in a group.”

Missouri Hills is clean and homey, with plush couches, stuffed animals on the bunks, and a dog rescued from the pound. The violence that plagues many juvenile prisons is also absent.

In a typical juvenile corrections environment, Mr. Decker said, if a youth becomes aggressive “you would have guards drag him into isolation” for three days.

“But,” he added, “the problem is that a young person doesn’t learn how to avoid that aggressive behavior and it will get worse.”

In Missouri Hills, isolation rooms were used only about a dozen times last year, Mr. Decker said, and never for more than a few hours. Pepper spray is banned, and youths are taught to de-escalate fights or apply grappling holds, a form of restraint.

Victoria, 16, who stole her grandmother’s car, her second offense, explained how her housing unit does a “circle-up,” or ad hoc counseling session, several times a day, whenever there is a conflict, like cursing.

“There’s drama all the time,” she said. “It’s like having a bunch of sisters.”

The Missouri system provided triage for an imploding system in Washington, where the juvenile corrections agency was plagued by vermin-infested buildings, overcrowding and chronic violence.

“The kids were stuffing their shirts with paper before they went to sleep to keep the roaches and rats from biting them,” said Vincent Schiraldi, head of the city’s Division of Rehabilitative Services.

With advice from experts in Missouri, Mr. Schiraldi divided platoons of youths into small groups. By October, the number of juveniles reconvicted within a year of release dropped to 25 percent, from 31 percent four years earlier. However, as conditions improved, confinements have risen, even as juvenile crime has declined.

Mr. Decker said that upgrading facilities and training new staff cost more initially, but that the reforms would reduce recidivism, which would result in long-term savings.

VonErrick has been home for a few weeks, and his 18-year-old sister said he seemed calmer and less interested in running with the wrong crowd. Their mother, Rosie Williams, said all three of her sons seemed more focused, and she attributed the changes to the counselors at the state group home.

Ms. Williams, whose husband is in prison, occasionally attended family counseling sessions where she said she learned important lessons as a parent. “Instead of just hollering at them and trying to keep them out of trouble,” she said, “I try to do things with them one on one, to get to know what’s on their mind and what’s going on in their lives.”