



Disability Rights Center

The Protection and Advocacy System for People with Disabilities in Arkansas



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News Release

Experts and Advocates Recommend Reforms for Arkansas's Long Troubled Juvenile Justice System

LITTLE ROCK - Youth and disability advocates joined together Tuesday to provide recommendations for reforming the state's long troubled juvenile justice system. Advocates released the independently authored report, *Conditions of Confinement at the Arkansas Juvenile Assessment and Treatment Center*, which finds that the single-most pressing problem facing our state is the excessive reliance on "secure correction confinement" of young people, such as at the facility in Alexander, when they do not require such an expensive and restrictive level of custody.

The report finds that a large percentage of the population placed by the Division of Youth Services at Alexander are there for minor offenses and non-violent behavior that can be dealt with in less restrictive and less costly programs. The report further finds that placement of these low-risk youth at Alexander is harmful to them, and that the youth would be better served through individualized rehabilitative programming and supervision in their communities.

"For over 100 years, Arkansans have struggled with how to address the needs of our children who get into trouble with the law," said Dana McClain of the Disability Rights Center. "Because it is time for us to come up with solutions, we have joined forces with other concerned advocates

and asked juvenile justice experts to help us and the Division of Youth Services to change our approach, for the sake of our troubled youth and, ultimately, for the safety of our communities.”

“This report points out what advocates across the state clearly understand, that the Arkansas juvenile justice system is at a crossroads,” said Paul Kelly of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. “It is time to stop pointing fingers and start pointing to the solutions that have worked in other states to solve the problems that continue to haunt us in Arkansas.”

Pat Arthur of the National Center for Youth Law said, “In any state there is a need to have a secure custody option for youth who really present a risk to public safety. But more and more states are realizing that it damages youth, instead of helps them, to lock them up unnecessarily in secure custody. Leaders in Arkansas are taking bold first steps toward reform with their willingness to take a hard look at their over use of incarceration and by committing to the development of more and better community-based treatment options.

“We appreciate the helpful observations made by these juvenile justice experts in their report on Alexander, and we are in substantial agreement with many of their recommendations for making our system better,” said Ron Angel, Director of the Division of Youth Services. “We look forward to working with the advocacy community, the legislature, judges, families, community providers, and others to rebuild our juvenile justice system so that it is one that truly helps the youth entrusted to our care.”

The day following the press conference, there will be a meeting of a state-wide Task Force that is being convened by the Division of Youth Services to discuss reforms needed in the state’s juvenile justice system. The Director of the Missouri juvenile justice system, Mr. Tim Decker, has been invited to discuss the model system for troubled youth developed in that state. The Task Force meeting will be held on September 19th beginning at 11:00 a.m. at the Arkansas Real Estate Commission Conference Room.

The report’s principal author is Tim Roche, a nationally renowned juvenile justice expert, and he can be reached at: 607-351-9636.

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