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Louisiana Juvenile Justice System dismissed from federal oversight

Press Release from the LA Gov's office... _____

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Former Critics Credit Reforms, Hail System for Creating Potential "National Model"

BATON ROUGE, La. - A U.S. district judge today dismissed a 1998 federal lawsuit against Louisiana's juvenile justice system, citing substantial improvements in youth safety and treatment, as well as significant progress toward implementing a milestone statewide reform strategy for the way the state treats its troubled youth.

U.S. District Judge James Brady granted a motion from all parties to dismiss the eight-year-old lawsuit, which became part of litigation that had been ongoing for 35 years. He cited a reduction in the youth population in secure facilities, fewer incidents of youth violence in facilities, increased investigative resources to ferret out violence, more effective behavioral health and rehabilitation services, and comprehensive behavior management programs, including a specialized program for sex offenders.

The motion also hailed the state's new juvenile justice reform plan as an emerging national model. "As it has moved away from a correctional-based approach, the state has developed an innovative and unique model to care for youth in secure care: the Louisiana Model (LAMOD). To develop LAMOD, the state worked in collaboration with the Missouri Youth Services Institute and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The program is not yet implemented throughout the system, but once it is the State of Louisiana stands to become a national model in the care of youth in secure care."

"When I took office more than 2 years ago, I set out to reform Louisiana's broken juvenile justice system to ensure that it was a system designed to rehabilitate youth not a system designed to feed our adult prisons," said Governor Blanco. "We want to keep kids in our classrooms and out of trouble. But for those who come to our juvenile system, we need to provide them with the best treatment possible so that they leave us well prepared to make good decisions -- respectful decisions -- as they return to our communities. We believe that the best way to ensure public safety is to provide rigorous programs and treatment to our youth."

Office of Youth Development head, Simon Gonsoulin said the continued support of the Governor, dedicated and hard working OYD staffers and determined partners will help ensure that a reformed juvenile justice system becomes a reality.

"As a state we must give these young people the promise of a brighter future, we must tell them there are communities, families and partners working for them in a united and directed manner. We have to say to them that they are valued. We must provide them with a safe environment to learn, and we must ensure that they will prosper," Gonsoulin said after the hearing.

Louisiana was one of 22 jurisdictions nationwide with juvenile justice systems under federal supervision. In the Louisiana case, the U. S. Department of Justice and the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana alleged that the state failed to provide reasonably safe conditions and adequate educational, medical, dental, mental health, and rehabilitative services.

The lawsuit focused on four facilities: Jetson Center for Youth near Baton Rouge, Swanson Center for Youth in Monroe, Bridge City Center for Youth near New Orleans and Swanson Correctional Center for Youth in Tallulah. The educational claims were dismissed in 2003. Claims against Bridge City and Tallulah, which is no longer a juvenile facility, were dismissed in 2004.

"We want to congratulate the Governor and her people for all their work and a job well done," said JJPL executive director David

Utter. "We all recognize that the dismissal of the lawsuit marks a landmark step in the continuing reform process and frees the Office of Youth Development, advocates and families to work in partnership to deepen the reforms the Governor started with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, improve programs for our children and communities and work to turn the Louisiana system from worst to first."

"This is an important achievement for the Governor. She made juvenile justice reform a priority, recognizing that treating young people differently than adults and providing opportunities to rehabilitate increases public safety, and saves us money in the long run," said Utter.

Louisiana's progress toward a more community-based, treatment-centered approach accelerated in 2003 when the Legislature passed Act 1225 of the 2003 Regular Session to systematically restructure the juvenile justice system in Louisiana. In one of her first actions as Governor, Blanco separated juvenile services from adult corrections, making the Office of Youth Development an independent agency. This change underscored the commitment and energy of reforming juvenile justice in Louisiana from a corrections model to one that is centered on the treatment and rehabilitation of youth.

The state's commitment to reform attracted national partners in the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Missouri Division of Youth Services, which is considered the leading system in the country.

In 2004, Louisiana began working with the Casey Foundation and Mark Steward, then director of Missouri's DYS, to develop Louisiana's Model for Juvenile Justice. Most notably, the model features a more homelike environment in secure facilities; group processes led by new staff called YouthCare workers; dorm sizes of 10-12 youth (down from an average of 37 in 1997); a focus on a therapeutic, child-centered environment versus a correctional, custodial model; and an emphasis on relationship-building that affords youth the opportunity to belong and contribute, make meaningful choices, develop transferable skills and mentor peers. The state introduced its reform pilot at Bridge City in July 2005.

The state released a five-year strategic plan in December that outlines specific reform objectives and measurements. Designed to reduce recidivism and improve the overall effectiveness of the system, the reform emphasizes the development of and funding for community-based programs, community and family involvement, regional placement of youth so they can stay closer to their homes and families, public and youth safety, development of a continuum of care at the local level and tracking and measurement of progress.

The plan was developed with significant public input, including 10 public meetings throughout the state last summer. More than 1,600 community members participated.

Louisiana now has about 406 youth in four secure juvenile facilities. For more information about Louisiana's juvenile justice system, visit the OYD website at www.oyd.louisiana.gov.

Posted by lois at May 2, 2006 05:31 PM

Comments