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Blueprint for Change

Juvenile Justice

Issue Brief

CURRENT SITUATION

Blueprint Report requires implementation. The Report is a landmark that incorporates research of current practice and results, voter attitudes, best practices from around the country, and input of youth served. It validates calls for reform and leaves no doubt that meaningful improvement to Florida's juvenile justice system is possible and needed. Problems found by the Blueprint Commission require attention:

- **Communities need support:** Communities bear the burden of providing prevention services for at-risk youth, but have limited capacity and resources with which to respond. Public school systems – themselves under stress – increasingly use Zero Tolerance practices to ship youth to the juvenile justice system rather than apply alternative methods of discipline.
- **Detention/incarceration overextended:** Even in the face of a decline in overall juvenile justice system referrals, the use of secure detention (jail-like setting) is increasing. Florida places youth in secure detention and in residential commitment at rates that exceed national norms.
- **Legal reforms:** The Florida Supreme Court should require consultation with an attorney before a child takes a plea or gives up rights to legal representation. Guidelines for expunging records must insure youth have future opportunities to gain meaningful employment and access to education and vocational training.
- **Girls need dedicated support:** There is a growing proportion of girls in the juvenile justice system, which presents a host of health, mental health and programmatic challenges.
- **Minorities are overrepresented:** There is a disproportionate number of minorities in the system – and the disproportion grows worse as children penetrate deeper into the system.
- **Youth health needs:** Across gender and race, the physical and mental health needs of youth in the juvenile justice system are extraordinary. Two-thirds have mental-health and/or substance abuse problems.
- **Staff need support:** Through its many challenges, the juvenile justice system struggles to attract and keep a quality work force. Direct care staff is poorly equipped, compensation is low, and annual turnover ranges from 35% to 66%, negatively impacting the youth in its care.

CAUSES & CHALLENGES

Blueprint recommendations reflect pressing needs. Understanding how Florida got to where it is and where problems lie was vital to the Commission's work. But it is not driving policy in critical areas. Juvenile detention legislation directly contrary to Blueprint recommendations passed the 2008 Florida House but did not become law.

BUDGET IMPACT

Despite the Blueprint recommendations, the 2008 Florida Legislature cut direct services and emerging solutions to longstanding problems. The Department of Juvenile Justice budget is \$643-million, reduced from over \$690-million the previous year. Successful interventions were reduced or eliminated, including Juvenile Assessment Centers, prevention, CINS/FINS, girls programs, day treatment, residential and aftercare, leaving thousands of youth without services.

VOTER VOICE

Recent Department of Juvenile Justice policy decisions and legislative actions are falling out of alignment with Florida voter preferences. When surveyed, voters emphasize recreation and education programs, crisis intervention services, support and counseling, more prevention, and services to girls. In contrast, the Department is relying on detention and incarceration, deep-end programs, and returning troubled children prematurely to public schools while not moving fast enough to eliminate systemic disproportionate treatment.

ACTION NEEDED

Blueprint report released: A comprehensive plan for improvement is now on the desks of Florida policy makers. A summary of recommendations includes:

- ★ The State of Florida needs to invest in programs that can provide the right services at the right time in the least-restrictive environment, while continuing to provide serious sanctions for youth involved in serious and violent crime, where appropriate.
- ★ Florida should increase its investment in community-based prevention and early intervention services that help keep kids out of trouble, including services to status offenders. Florida should further invest in alternative diversion services at the community level to prevent youth from further penetrating the juvenile justice system.
- ★ Florida residential facilities should be small, provide quality educational skill-building, health, mental health and substance abuse services. Youth must be prepared to return to their communities.
- ★ Florida must provide more gender-specific programming, address the disproportionate presence of minorities in the system, and provide adequate resources to meet the mental and physical health needs of youth.
- ★ Florida must invest in the human resources that provide quality direct care services to youth in the system and develop a more professional and stable workforce.
- ★ At every point, Florida should implement programs and strategies that have demonstrated effectiveness in protecting public safety while at the same time providing an optimum future for our youth.

DEFINITIONS

Blueprint Commission: In 2006 Children's Campaign, Inc., publicly called for the formation of a gubernatorially appointed Juvenile Justice Blueprint Commission. Officially titled *Getting Smart about Juvenile Justice in Florida*, the Commission Report analyzes existing systems and problems and makes dozens of specific recommendations. Children's Campaign President Roy Miller served as a senior advisor. The Commission released its report in 2008. The document is online at: <http://www.djj.state.fl.us/blueprint>.

