



Changing the Juvenile Justice System

By: Colin Poitras
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When Connecticut lawmakers were looking for volunteers to oversee sweeping changes to parts of the state's ailing juvenile justice system, they turned to two University of Connecticut professors who have dedicated their careers to helping troubled children.



Preston Britner,
associate professor
of family studies.
Photo by Melissa Arbo

Preston Britner, a professor of human development and family services and a national expert in juvenile delinquency prevention, was hand-picked by Senate President Pro Tem Donald Williams, the highest ranking legislator in the General Assembly. Martha Stone, an adjunct professor at the UConn School of Law and a well-known civil rights attorney who filed a landmark class-action lawsuit on behalf of state foster children, was selected by former House Speaker James Amann.

For the past five years, Britner and Stone have led a concerted effort to completely revamp the way the state responds to youths in crisis as co-chairs of the Families with Service Needs, or FWSN, Advisory Board. Families with service needs are those with children who are frequent runaways, habitually truant, sexually active, or generally disobedient of family rules. Those children also are called "status offenders," because they often are accused of violating court orders rather than committing a crime.

One of the board's primary accomplishments was the creation of Family Support Centers, a research-based alternative to helping troubled teens steer clear of the juvenile court system. The support centers are now listed on the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Protection website as a best practice that is to be emulated.

William H. Carbone, executive director of the Connecticut Judicial Branch's Court Support Services Division, which worked closely with the FWSN Advisory Board, has high praise for Britner's and Stone's work.

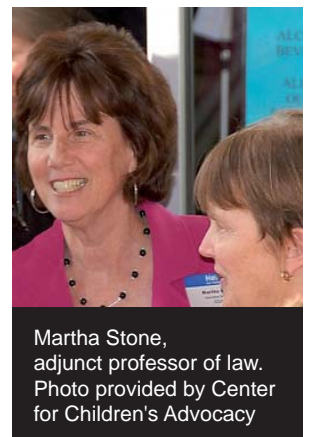
"They are extraordinary people and they have made an extraordinary difference in the services, policies, and laws extended to children in this state," Carbone said. "These kids are no longer being placed in detention. Now we have Family Support Centers where children and families can get the crisis intervention and counseling support they need."

Sweeping Changes

The four (soon to be seven) Family Support Centers around the state are just a small portion of the broad changes the board implemented. The advisory board included representatives across the juvenile justice spectrum including: Court Support Services, the Office of the Child Advocate, the Department of Children and Families, and others. Working as a team, the members reviewed and implemented important statutory changes affecting juveniles, insisting that troubled teens be screened for service needs before being funneled into juvenile court. They created a detailed triage and support network for status offenders diverted from the court system; issued recommendations for reducing truancy statewide; and installed long overdue respite services for teenage girls at risk of entering the juvenile justice system.

"As a result of this effort, we helped to reform the entire status offender system," says Stone, who also serves as executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy at the UConn School of Law. "Status offenses are really a gateway for juvenile delinquency. By addressing status offenders, we can have a real impact on the juvenile justice population." The state Judicial Branch in 2005 estimated that half of reported status offenders eventually became delinquent.

Up until a few years ago, the state's response to out-of-control teens was to commit them to



Martha Stone,
adjunct professor of law.
Photo provided by Center
for Children's Advocacy

a secure juvenile detention center, where they would be mixed in with more serious juvenile offenders and processed through the state's juvenile court system.

The thought was that placing the troubled teens in the judicial system would give them access to the counseling and support they needed. But over time, state officials realized that locking up troubled kids just to provide them with services unfairly punished the status offenders who hadn't broken any laws.

Recognizing the need to overhaul the system, the Connecticut legislature passed a law in 2005 prohibiting children in violation of FWSN orders from being committed to detention facilities. A year later, the legislature created the FWSN advisory board to search for, manage, and monitor more appropriate services for at-risk youths.

The Family Support Centers that grew out of the board's work are intended to address potential problems early and divert at-risk youth away from the child welfare and juvenile justice systems and into community-based, family-focused interventions, Britner says.

The support center model relies on probation officers and community-based nonprofit service providers to offer immediate assessment and support to teens in crisis. The model also requires caseworkers to contact families within three hours of a referral and to collaborate with nearby service providers to develop a detailed plan of action that might include counseling, mediation, mental health treatment, and respite care.

"It's almost like the difference between waiting until something bad happens and then trying to put out a fire as opposed to trying to identify potential problems early and focusing on prevention," says Britner.

Britner and Stone were presented with the 2008 Award for Legislative Advocacy by the Connecticut Youth Services Administration for their leadership of the advisory board, which finished its work July 1.

Immediate Impact

Initial research shows the Family Support Centers and statutory changes are having an immediate impact. According to an independent analysis conducted by the Justice Research Center in 2008, in a comparison between how Connecticut treated juveniles in 2006-2007 and how they were treated after four Family Support Centers opened around the state in 2007-2008, there was:

- A 41 percent decrease in the number of status offense referrals to juvenile court;
- A 94 percent decrease in the judicial handling of FWSN cases;
- An 80 percent decrease in the number of FWSN complaints.