

A second chance

Youth-justice reform = safer state

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SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Our juvenile-justice system is like a bicycle stuck in one gear. We continue to rely on incarceration, regardless of the risk a youth poses to public safety, even though this has been shown to be both ineffective and a waste of resources.

For all the money it takes to incarcerate youthful offenders, we could be investing those dollars in our communities.

Families, schools, and social-service agencies could provide less costly and more effective services for youth in trouble. Community-based treatment uses all available gears to increase the opportunities for youth success. And it enhances public safety too.

As our burgeoning adult correction system is fed by unaltered youthful behavior, youth justice is becoming a pressing policy priority in Arkansas. Troubling reports of dangerous and abusive conditions in our youth lockups fuel the call for reform. Incarcerating youthful offenders who don't present a public-safety risk is the same as giving up on them.

These kids are going to return to their communities one day, and we need to make sure they're ready for that. Our systems can build ways for youth to be held accountable and understand the consequences of their actions without resorting to incarceration.

Several promising steps are already underway.

We have research-based assessment tools to determine the risk and needs of youth who have been involved with the courts. One assessment is made at the time of intake to determine if the youth needs to go before the court. The other is a comprehensive assessment completed if and when the youth is found to be guilty of an offense.

This appraisal not only determines the child's risk of re-offending, but identifies the specific treatment, support, and intervention needed to address the child's underlying problems. The judge then orders restrictions and consequences that fit the individual youth and his or her family.

This is good policy. And these tools are set to be implemented statewide by the end of 2017.

In 2013, the Annie E. Casey Foun-

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ation's Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative was introduced at two detention centers in Northwest Arkansas. A thorough review of hundreds of youth case files revealed that many detained youth could safely return home or be placed in other less restrictive settings. Both communities significantly reduced the number of kids being locked up.

Their success inspired other detention centers, and there is hope of expanding these successes statewide.

Gov. Asa Hutchinson has also now formed the Youth Justice Reform Board as mandated by the Legislature. Its goal is also to reduce the use of secure

confinement for low-risk youth. This is a welcome and critical step toward significant reform in our state's youth justice system.

All of these hopeful developments bode well for the state and its children.

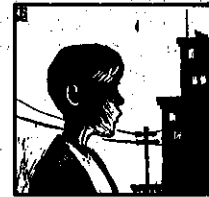
Reforming the justice system can be a risky thing for elected officials. One high-profile incident or series of events can undo positive reforms.

It is incumbent on all of us to recognize that young people have the potential to mature and change. To accomplish that, youth don't just need second chances, but a rational first response.

We need to reduce the unnecessary incarceration of youthful offenders and invest the savings in community programs that will save taxpayer money and strengthen our ability to redirect these young people. We know this will work. Other states have improved public safety by doing just that.

Fewer youth are sent to corrections facilities in other states compared to Arkansas, and savings are invested in more effective community-based alternatives that show better results. In Arkansas, we need elected officials to lead with rational policymaking so we can do the same.

Even good kids make bad decisions. But they are ours, just the same.



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