

<http://philanthropy.com/premium/articles/v20/i15/15001201.htm>

Charity Works to Transform Lives by Transforming Youth-Correctional Facilities

[By Caroline Preston](#)

Laurel, Md.

The scene resembles a dormitory lounge: Half a dozen teenagers hover around a large television screen in this brick residential building, playing the video game Madden NFL. Three boys sit on the edge of an overstuffed green couch, while two others lounge on couches behind them, looking on quietly. There's a ping-pong table in the middle of the room, stationary bikes in one corner.

This particular recreation room, however, is part of Oak Hill Youth Center, a juvenile correctional facility that houses about 90 boys from the District of Columbia who have run afoul of the law. Many have been convicted more than once, for crimes such as drug dealing, robbery, and assault.

Until last year, Oak Hill's facility more closely resembled a prison, with cold tile floors, a Plexiglas wall that separated guards from the youths, beds bolted to the walls, and hard, plastic chairs for seating. The redesigned cell rooms now have wooden desks, dressers, and beds with colorful blankets.

The facility's makeover has occurred thanks in part to the Missouri Youth Services Institute, a nonprofit group started in 2005 by Mark Steward, a longtime director of Missouri's Division of Youth Services.

For the past two years, staff members with the Jefferson City charity have worked with D.C. government officials, assisting them in overhauling the detention center based on an approach pioneered by Mr. Steward in his state during the 1970s and 1980s.

"It was one of the most neglected systems I've seen in my 30-something-odd years in this work," says Mr. Steward of the Washington youth center. "It was filthy, chaotic, and violent."

When Mr. Steward was hired in the 1970s to lead Missouri's juvenile-justice system, murders, rapes, and assaults were so rife at the state's juvenile-detention centers that some judges refused to sentence youths to the prisons.

But by breaking Missouri's sprawling correctional facilities into smaller units, and emphasizing therapy, schooling, and rehabilitation, Mr. Steward was able not only to make the facilities more secure but also to bring the state's recidivism rate to one of the lowest in the country.

Missouri's Approach

The Annie E. Casey Foundation and the JEHT Foundation, among other donors, have helped Mr. Steward export that model to Washington and three other locations: Louisiana, New Mexico, and Santa Clara County, Calif. (Casey has provided \$1-million, and JEHT has given approximately \$270,000, along with other support, for the charity's work in Washington.)

While Missouri's approach isn't necessarily cheaper than more-punitive systems, cities and states will eventually save money if they can stop young people from committing crimes over and over again, Mr. Steward says. May 15, 2008

Pili Robinson, who leads the Missouri Youth Services Institute's program in Washington, says that much of the group's work has focused on changing the mind-set of the facility's employees. Staff members are no longer simply prison guards; they're encouraged instead to see themselves as playing a role in turning youths' lives around. Their titles have changed, too, from "correctional officer" to "youth development specialist."

"We're training them to look at the kids differently," he says, "not as juvenile offenders but as young people who've had a lot of tough life experiences that have led them to act this way."

In the past, says Vincent Schiraldi, director of Washington's Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, a kid who'd spat in a guard's face would have been locked up for 24, maybe even 72 hours. Today, if an employee gets spat on, he's encouraged to wash his face off, recover his calm, and then lead the youths in a session on respect and dignity.

Washington was chosen as one of four locations where the "Missouri model" might take root because charity staff members believed that D.C. officials were committed to change. The city had long had a lousy reputation for juvenile care, amassing more than \$3-million in court fines for failing to meet standards of care set out in a 1986 court decree.

But that began to change in 2005, when Mr. Schiraldi, founder of the Justice Policy Institute, a Washington nonprofit group that sought to reduce the nation's reliance on incarceration, took over the youth-rehabilitation department. Mr. Robinson says that Mr. Schiraldi convinced Missouri Youth Services Institute staff members that he was serious about trying a new approach.

"There are many people who say they want to change the system and do something for kids, but when it starts to get tough, they bow out," says Mr. Robinson, who previously managed juvenile correctional facilities in the St. Louis region of Missouri. "Vinnie was really committed to fighting the long fight."

Meeting Resistance

Mr. Schiraldi and the Missouri Youth Services Institute's three staff members assigned to Washington have already seen their fair share of fights over the past few years. Chief among those has been overcoming resistance on the part of many employees of the Oak Hill facility.

Many of the center's staff members, who were recruited as prison guards, didn't want to see their responsibilities shift. Some sought to have Mr. Schiraldi fired.

Meanwhile, youths released from Oak Hill have gotten into some well-publicized trouble, leading some politicians to wonder if the new approach is too soft to be effective. According to statistics cited by the *Washington Post* editorial writer Colbert I. King, six teenagers who were under the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services' supervision at Oak Hill and other less-secure facilities were arrested on homicide charges from January to October of 2007.

Mr. Schiraldi says that he and his team have been able to overcome those kinds of obstacles because of the strong political support he's built. Sitting in his office in Northeast Washington, he talks about the good will that's stemmed from programs like a Shakespeare performance that some of Oak Hill's youths put on recently at City Hall, with support from the Carter and Melissa Cafritz Charitable Trust, in Washington, among other donors.

Oak Hill's residents have also been the subject of a lot of positive news-media attention, including a *Washington Post Magazine* cover story, a framed copy of which hangs to the right of Mr. Schiraldi's desk. The cover shows several young men standing in a creek in Arizona, oars in hand, as part of a wilderness trip designed to reward teenagers for their improved behavior and expand their worldview. The Open Society Institute and other grant makers have supported those kinds of programs.

"If something happens that's bad enough, you can pretty much expect any politician to throw you under the bus," he says. "I've had some pretty bad stuff happen, but I think part of the reason that I haven't gotten thrown under the bus is I've done all this other stuff, I've made an effort to garner political support, and everyone knows how bad it was."

Since their early battles with staff members, Mr. Schiraldi and Mr. Robinson have succeeded in getting rid of some of the facility's more recalcitrant employees. About 60 people departed in 2007, Mr. Schiraldi says. The department has introduced a special early-retirement deal that he's hopeful some other staff members will take advantage of.

More to Do

Oak Hill is still a far cry from Missouri's youth correctional facilities, however. Mr. Robinson says that the attitudes among employees of Oak Hill are only beginning to shift and that the charity's staff members will need to spend many more hours training, coaching, and overseeing employees. The charity's contract runs out in 2009.

Still, the facility's teenagers rarely spend time locked down in their cells, while some used to spend 22 hours a day in their cells as punishment. Few incidents now occur as staff members change shifts. The youths are attending school, which is run by the nonprofit See Forever Foundation, in Washington, for longer hours.

Eventually, Mr. Schiraldi hopes that employees will be required to have earned 60 college credits toward a bachelor's degree, ideally in the social services. He's considering raising pay and benefits to attract more-skilled staff members.

"It's a slow process, and people don't see results overnight," says Mr. Robinson. "Oak Hill is on the right path, though, and I get more and more optimistic every month as we go through this process."

While violence among teenagers at the Oak Hill facility has fallen, Mr. Robinson said he'd liked to see the number of assaults and other serious incidents reduced to zero. (The Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services doesn't have data on current levels of violence.)

He'd also like to see recidivism rates fall — the District is just starting to measure those numbers — and to see employees fully embrace a rehabilitative approach to their work.

Washington officials are also building a new facility and are hoping to nearly halve Oak Hill's population, to 60.

Mr. Schiraldi says the support he's received from officials at the Missouri Youth Services Institute has helped breathe some hope into a broken system.

"I have no idea how we would have done this without them," he says. "I guess I would have had to come up with a Plan B, but I really I just don't have a Plan B right now."