

Intervention leads to drop in juvenile cases

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HARTFORD -- Early intervention into the lives of troubled kids has resulted in a 30 percent decrease in juvenile justice cases over the last four years, according to a new report that credits community services and increased departmental cooperation on the state level.

The report, released Wednesday by the National Juvenile Justice Network and the Bridgeport-based Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, says that since a class-action lawsuit was settled in 1997, Connecticut has made massive changes and is now a national model for reform.

State officials said that enhanced work between the Judicial Branch and the state Department of Children and Families has led to sharp declines in the number of children in custody. Early diagnosis of behavioral problems is keeping them out of trouble in school and on the streets.

"Connecticut has shifted from merely containing youth to addressing the issues that led them to get into trouble," said Sarah Bryer, director of the National Juvenile Justice Network. "The state now recognizes that most children can be helped in their own communities rather than in expensive residential facilities. That's better for youth and certainly better for taxpayers.

Abby Anderson, executive director of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, said Wednesday the changes have been occurring over the last 10 years, as state officials and social-service providers have concentrated on preventative programming, especially children's mental health.

Fewer children are being incarcerated for truancy and runaway issues, the report said, adding that Family Support Centers have also helped with caseloads.

"For the first time we're really addressing the causes instead of throwing the kids into the justice system," Anderson said. "The reductions have happened as the system became more focused on holding kids accountable and doing the rehabilitative piece. We're looking at the situation more holistically."

Advocates warn the state should follow through on its 2007 law raising the age that teens are considered adults from the current 16, up to 18 by Jan. 1, 2010. It's highly unlikely, however, that it will take full effect.

Instead, lawmakers negotiating the budget are hoping for a hike to 17 on Jan. 1, 2010 and a two-year phase in for 18 to take effect by January 2012.

William H. Carbone, executive director of the Judicial Branch's support-services division, said Wednesday that the results have been startling.

"We're seeing revolutionary trends in the juvenile system and I think the policy changes we've made are bearing fruit," Carbone said in a phone interview. He said the branch has invested in reducing case loads for probation officers, so they have more time to address complex problems in children and families.

New methods of interviewing children have also been developed and an expanded range of clinical services have been offered over the past several years. Carbone said that five years ago, there was an average of 140 kids a day in detention statewide, and it's now down to 70 or 80.

"Seven or eight years ago DCF took about 750 children from their homes," Carbone said. "Now it is below 250." He said youthful repeat offenders are also dropping in number.

"I think a lot of in-home clinical services are also preventing siblings from coming into the system," Carbone said.

State Child Advocate Jeanne M. Milstein agreed that the report's encouraging, but she underscored the need to raise the age that juveniles are treated as adults.

"We have to make sure that raise-the-age is implemented and the remainder of the Family Support Centers are full funded," Milstein said in a phone interview. "Frankly, in the long run, it saves a lot of money. The governor and the Legislature made a commitment when they passed this law a few years ago and now it's time to continue to implement that commitment. We're seeing that the reforms are working. It's time to get to the next step."

Copies of the report are available at the Web site of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance: www.ctjja.org.