



Cheryl Kreager, Director, Juvenile Justice Coalition of Minnesota

Interview with The Civic Caucus

8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

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Notes of the Discussion

Present : Verne Johnson (chair), David Broden, Audrey Clay (phone), Janis Clay (phone), Paul Gilje (coordinator), Dan Loritz (vice-chair), Tim McDonald, Clarence Shallbetter

Summary of discussion - Cheryl Kreager, director of the Juvenile Justice Coalition of Minnesota describes the opportunity for expanding the scope of programs for young people who commit crimes to include more effective interventions. Most inappropriate behaviors are symptoms of underlying problems, Kreager asserts, which detention or out-of-home placement alone does not successfully address. She suggests alternatives to detention or out-of-home placement and a strategy to develop effective measures through involvement of those in the juvenile justice system.

A. Introduction of interviewee - Cheryl Kreager has worked with the Juvenile Justice Coalition of Minnesota (JJC) since 2007, as a project manager, associate director and now as director, co-leading the formation of the organization's transition from a Hennepin County based group to a statewide coalition focused on improving Minnesota's juvenile justice system. She manages JJC's systems change efforts in collaboration with a 25-member statewide steering committee, numerous volunteer groups and professionals and practitioners throughout the state.

Kreager earned a master's degree in public affairs from the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and a bachelor's degree from the College of St. Benedict. She holds a certificate from Georgetown University's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform.

B. Discussion -

THE PROBLEM : We don't meet the needs of Minnesota's youth.

"Many young people in the state have major needs in their lives that aren't being met, and as a result they often end up in the juvenile justice system," Kreager said.

Seventy percent of young people in the system have mental health issues. Many have sexual and/or substance abuse in their backgrounds; many have witnessed violence; many are members of single parent families; many come from families in poverty.

These are the society's most vulnerable kids, Kreager added, that have had some of the worst things happen to them - and our community's response is to put them into a system that punishes them again. It's not, perhaps, an intentional cruelty, but it is the reality for this population.

There is also disproportionate representation of minorities in this population - as measured both against the state's demographics and that of the rest of the country.

Some of the biases in the system have been addressed. Inequities continue to exist, but the underlying issues run deep. The data shows that poverty, ineffective parenting and substance abuse are some of the risk factors for youths ending up in the juvenile justice system.

THE GOAL: Meet children's needs so they can become successful adults.

"We don't have any common measures of outcomes for our state juvenile justice system," Kreager said, "and no common definition for recidivism. That makes it difficult to measure the relative effectiveness of different approaches."

The goals stated in statute are simple: public safety and rehabilitation. Ensuring public safety can employ two methods: stopping a threat to public safety as it is happening, or preventing it from happening.

Rehabilitation is a troublesome term, Kreager said, because it implies that these youth are broken and need to be fixed. "All the problems we see - mental illness, acting out in antisocial ways- are symptoms of a more difficult underlying issue in the life of the youth."

A participant observed that we have become a very controlled society. Young people used to be able to do much more than they're allowed to do now.

"This would be my second problem-statement," Kreager said. "We really have criminalized young people's behavior." A lot of this criminalization has grown out of the terror caused by school shootings, and some is the result of the No Child Left Behind legislation. Nowadays if boys or girls get in fights, they get charged with assault; if they talk back in school they're likely charged with some other offense as well.

This is a problem because these charges follow them into adult life. It used to be that juvenile justice was a private affair; now for example, Minnesota has almost 100 professional licenses through Human Services that can be withheld due to a youth's juvenile record and prevent them from getting employment in many professions. (This is unusual in the country.)

"What I struggle with is defining people for life upon decisions they make and actions they take when they're a teenager."

THE STRATEGY: Get people to work across departmental lines to focus on prevention.

The Justice Coalition works statewide to bring people involved in these issues together, Kreager said. The members of the Coalition have no authority, but seek to influence. They are trying to get people to look at systems change.

"Minnesota has one of the best systems in the country. As much as we may criminalize kids, in fact we don't do it as much as other states. There are several states that send youth age 17, and two as young as age 16, into the adult system for all offenses. Many send young people to juvenile prisons. We don't do that. We provide therapeutic interventions and try to connect youth with community-based programs to solve problems first."

Find alternatives to detention and out-of-home placement.

Hennepin and Ramsey counties have especially improved their systems by reducing their use of secure detention, providing community-based interventions and reducing use of out-of-home placement. Many of the youth have substance use or other behavioral issues. These alternative tactics that address underlying problems are not only much more effective, Kreager said, but lower cost because they are more realistically aligned with the challenges young people are facing.

Research shows the "scared straight" model doesn't work, and that if young people are out of their homes for too long the effectiveness wears off.

The Juvenile Justice Coalition is funded by foundation and government sources. As a statewide organization, the Coalition has provided multiple training sessions around the state on best practices. The training is targeted toward a variety of state and local agencies whose services intersect with some aspect of juvenile justice. Many of the difficulties of dealing with youth stem from whether, for example, the young person is correctly assigned to one system or county department. The overlapping assignment of responsibility among the agencies has created a barrier to properly serving youths' needs.

Progress is being made. For example, until last year's legislative session, if young girls were picked up for prostitution they were treated as criminals. Now they're being treated as victims of sex trafficking. People in the system are beginning to recognize these are children with serious needs and that we have to understand why they're doing what they're doing in order to set them on a different path.

Create opportunities for cooperation.

Kreager's Steering Committee brought in the Public Strategies Group in April to discuss redesigning services to improve outcomes. "People recognize that one system is different from another system, but the systems all attempt to address the same kids with the same problems. What we're looking at is exploring redesigning the system for at-risk youth to improve the chances of positive changes in behavior."

The coalition is developing a strategy and looking at how to secure funding to go through the process of facilitating discussions among the different people working with at-risk youth statewide to lead to more effective juvenile justice interventions.

"The Steering Committee recognized that they're the stakeholders, but not the re-designers. That's good, because often in an industry you hear the same conversations over and over about what's not working; but insiders are sometimes too close to the system to get to the next step, actually redesigning the system to work more effectively. Often it is helpful to have the experts within the system describe it, and allow people on the outside to provide ideas for what could be done differently."

Minnesota's county-based system will aid innovation.

Minnesota has a county-based system with good people involved, Kreager said. Many states have a state-down hierarchy that inhibits change at the county level. Minnesota's county-based system allows for communities to create responses and interventions based on their unique needs and available resources. There is also a much stronger non-profit sector here to provide community-based interventions for youth involved in juvenile justice and a general philosophy that out-of-home placement is for high need or high risk youth. In some states up to 70 percent of youth held in secure detentions are for non-violent offenses and youth are routinely sent to juvenile correctional facilities that resemble adult prisons. All these factors favor Minnesota's prospects for effectively redesigning its juvenile justice system.

Kreager pointed out the juvenile justice system is not a single system. Minnesota has a county-based delivery system for juvenile justice, which comprises many different agencies. For example, while the judicial system is made of state employees, county attorneys and most probation officers are county employees. "I always tell people we have 87 different juvenile justice systems in Minnesota."

At once this makes innovation more possible, but also hampers wide-scale implementation of good redesign ideas or best practices. Whether youth are put through the whole formal court process or diverted to an alternative program depends entirely on local leaders' philosophies. These are significantly different options and consequently the treatment of youth is highly inconsistent across the state.

Kreager offered two specific suggestions for redesign:

-Reduce the number of court contacts. Keeping young people out of the court system is critical, Kreager said. Non-violent offenders should never see a courtroom. Once a young person gets into the court system, and the further up that system they go, the more likely they will remain in the justice system and the more likely they will reoffend.

-Develop programs targeted specifically at the underlying causes of inappropriate behavior.

Diversion is one response to youth's inappropriate behaviors or a way to identify the reasons behind a youth's actions. One example of an effective diversion program is operated by the Northern Star Boy Scouts Council. They offer a ten-class program to youth who have offended to educate them about what was done, what was wrong, and what could have been done instead. Other diversion efforts

screen youth and route youth found with mental health concerns toward mental health services. Some youth are required to complete community service if that appears to be more appropriate to the offense and to the youth's individual situation.

C. Conclusion -

"There are really good things happening - I've been amazed," Kreager said. Minnesota is out ahead of many other states, but is not yet meeting the needs of all young people. This is an area that represents a high potential for government redesign. "Now it is important to help the people involved to come up with new solutions."

The chair thanked Kreager for the visit.