

CPC Recommends Changes to Troubled Juvenile Justice System

The Children's Planning Council has submitted to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors a series of sweeping recommendations aimed at improving the County's troubled juvenile justice system.

The main thrust of the recommendations is to balance punishment and detention with a greater commitment to community-based prevention, early intervention, and rehabilitation. Among the recommendations:

- ***Establish charter schools and other innovative education programs in some of the Probation Department's juvenile halls and camps to test different teaching approaches and methodologies for detained youth.***
- ***Ensure that all youth in the system are given comprehensive and coordinated assessments and follow-through, including health, education, mental health, family, etc., and that those requiring intervention services receive them.***
- ***Separate out the youth and adult functions within the Probation Department, as 40 states in the nation have done.***
- ***Conduct an analysis of funding allocations to ensure that federal and state funding that is earmarked for community-based interventions is, in fact, made available to community-based organizations for prevention and intervention services.***
- ***Ensure equity in effective legal representation.***

The recommendations came in response to a request last May from the Board, which had commissioned CPC in 2005 to conduct an extensive review of the conditions of children and youth under the care of the County Probation Department. "The Board asked us to be bold and innovative in our thinking," says Yolie Flores Aguilar, CPC's chief executive officer. "These recommendations are meant to move us beyond simply addressing individual systemic problems to a major shift in how we view juvenile justice in L.A. County."

CPC's original report, a year in the making, was considered a significant step forward in understanding how the county's complex juvenile justice system works. In addition to the processing, decision-making, punishment, and treatment functions found in the adult justice system, juvenile systems also must pay attention to prevention, diversion, alternative sentencing, and integration of youth back into the community.

The "system" that manages all of these functions in L.A. County is extremely complicated because it encompasses so many different agencies and jurisdictions, crossing almost all of the county's political, geographic, and operational boundaries, according to the report.

“We have a unique opportunity to transform a juvenile justice system that affects more than 30,000 young men and women,” says Dr. Jacquelyn McCroskey, a Council member and the report’s principal author. “By balancing the need to administer justice with the opportunity to help young people and their families create a better future for themselves, we can create a system that serves all our best interests.”

In addition to detailing how youth are processed through the system, the report’s findings called attention to problems of inadequate educational, mental health, and substance abuse services; a lack of support services for families of youth in the system; limited transition services for youth leaving the system; and concerns regarding staffing and facilities.

“Transforming the existing system will undoubtedly create some discomfort,” says Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke, Second District, who currently chairs CPC. “But we feel this is a small price to pay if the result is a system that truly helps young people in need rather than simply locking them up.”