

Santa Clara County Probation Program's alternative to warehousing youths

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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At the Children's Defense Fund's Cradle to Prison Pipeline® Summit in Sacramento, CA, earlier this year, we heard from young people from Missouri and California who are trying to get out of the pipeline with the help of caring adults. Here's the story of one of them: At 13, Diego Ramirez's violent, alcoholic father kicked him out of the house and onto the streets of one of San Jose, CA's most dangerous neighborhoods.

After a period of scraping for food and a place to sleep from one day to the next, he turned to crime to survive and looked to gang bangers for support and acceptance. Diego (not his real name) didn't go to school and began abusing drugs and piling up arrest records instead of report cards.

Sadly, numerous poor children and teens like Diego, mostly Black and Latino, grow up in dysfunctional families and neighborhoods where gangs are so pervasive that joining one seems normal. They take up full-time apprenticeships in crime under drug dealers and car thieves. Few of them have positive role models or safe haven alternatives to the streets. Too many youths are unable to resist the lure of the streets, and they get sucked into the pipeline to prison.

But fortunately for Diego, at one point in the juvenile justice process, he was diverted to the Santa Clara County Probation Program and put on a path toward rehabilitation and healing. The probation program's two facilities, James Ranch and the Muriel Wright Residential Center, were modeled on the successful rehabilitative and therapeutic Missouri Division of Youth Services that focuses on the development of each individual youth in a healthy, positive environment. The James Ranch serves young men between the ages of 15 and a half and 18; the Muriel Wright Center is for boys younger than 15 and a half and girls 13 to 18.

Everything at these facilities is designed to help the young residents relax and feel physically and mentally secure. Located in rural Santa Teresa County Park, the Muriel Wright Center and the 23-acre James Ranch, in Morgan Hill, provide young people a healthy living environment removed from the gang life and negative influences many of them left behind. Residents live in carpeted one-story buildings in home-like settings. There are no locked doors and no guards.

Each resident is assigned to a pod, a group of 12 youths—often with former rival gang members. Each pod has a probation counselor—a combination mentor, role model, life coach and surrogate parent. One-to-one youth to staff relationships are common and counseling is available on a 24-hour basis.

Unlike too many other juvenile detention centers where young people are merely warehoused and, in some cases, abused, the Santa Clara County Probation Program is designed to rebuild residents from the inside out. The residents at the Muriel Wright Center attend school from 7:50 am to 2:30 pm and can take yoga and participate in sports, Girl Scouts, the Master Gardeners Club, community service and field trips. The Enterprise Program is available to older residents who learn welding, auto repair and construction trades. They can also earn their GEDs and take college courses online.

But the most important aspect of their six- to eight-month stay is the multidisciplinary rehabilitation program. One component of the program is the cognitive therapeutic approach

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that directs young people to confront the choices they've made—Why did you do what you did?—and develop empathy for their victims. A lot of this takes place in group sessions facilitated by the probation counselors but conducted on a peer-to-peer basis by the residents. A major focus is on helping the residents change their minds about some very basic concepts—their idea of authority, how they relate to others and their views of education.

The ultimate goal of the probation program is to empower each resident to reenter society as a healthy, productive citizen. Every week, the pods focus on equipping their members with the positive social skills that are essential for them to succeed after they leave the program. They work on dealing with stress, responding to failure, anger management, alternatives to aggression, effective communication, empathy, helping others, expressing affection, and planning and setting goals.

The Santa Clara County Probation Program demonstrates that the Missouri Division of Youth Services is a highly effective model for diverting young people from the pipeline to prison and lowering recidivism rates (its recidivism rate is just seven percent). Diego is proof. He has put his former life behind him and now attends college. He also plans to work with other young people with backgrounds similar to his own. His story demonstrates that it's much better to invest our limited tax dollars in programs like the Missouri Division of Youth Services and the Santa Clara County Probation Program, which can be replicated in other jurisdictions, than supporting large traditional, non-therapeutic "correctional facilities" that release youths who are poorly equipped for reentry back into our communities and who graduate into the adult criminal justice system. These are solutions and we should build on them.

Marian Wright Edelman, whose new book is *The Sea Is So Wide And My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation*, is president of the Children's Defense Fund. For more information about the Children's Defense Fund, go to <http://www.childrensdefense.org/>.