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Revamping Juvenile Justice Is Long, D...

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By [Marianne McCune](#)



A sign at the Finger Lakes Residential Center, a juvenile detention facility near Ithaca, New York. (Marianne McCune/WNYC)

When New York kids get convicted of a crime, they are either sent upstate to the juvenile equivalent of a prison, or allowed to stay at home enrolled in mandatory programs that aim to turn them into law-abiding citizens. The vast majority of inmates come from New York City. On Tuesday, Mayor Michael Bloomberg **announced he wants to overhaul the upstate juvenile facilities** because they have been plagued with incidents of abuse, they are expensive (approximately \$270,000 a year per inmate) and they are located hours away from the childrens' families.

Study after study has shown that incarcerating kids is unlikely to keep them out of trouble in the long run. A shocking 89 percent of boys end up back in the system by the time they turn 28. That's why in the last few years city and state officials have been diverting as many kids as possible into community-based programs. But about 700 are still housed in upstate institutions.

Gladys Carrion, the New York Commissioner of the State's Office of Children and Family Services, has been trying to alter the stark statistics since she took her job in 2007. She's made a lot of big changes, including establishing a bigger staff to inmate ratio and specialized care. But she says there are tremendous challenges to transforming a system based on punishment

into one of rehabilitation.

Jacob*, 18, wants to be the one youth out of five that climbs his way out of the underworld after being locked up as a minor. He spent more than two years in a high security facility in Claverack, New York, after holding up a clerk in a gift shop for \$800 when he was 15 years old.

Plenty had happened to Jacob before he turned to robbery. For most of his life, his mother left him in Brooklyn with babysitters while she worked in Long Island and stayed with a friend. One sitter sent him to school with bruises. And he says he routinely acted out to get attention. By 14, he had tried to commit suicide several times. Finally, he said his mom refused to pick him up from the hospital and he was sent to a group home in Rockland County. And that is where he robbed the store clerk with a bb gun he says did not work.

"I never had a solid family that I felt like, you know, loved me I guess," said Jacob. "I guess I really just did not know how to be the man or the student or the person that I'm expected to be or that I should be."



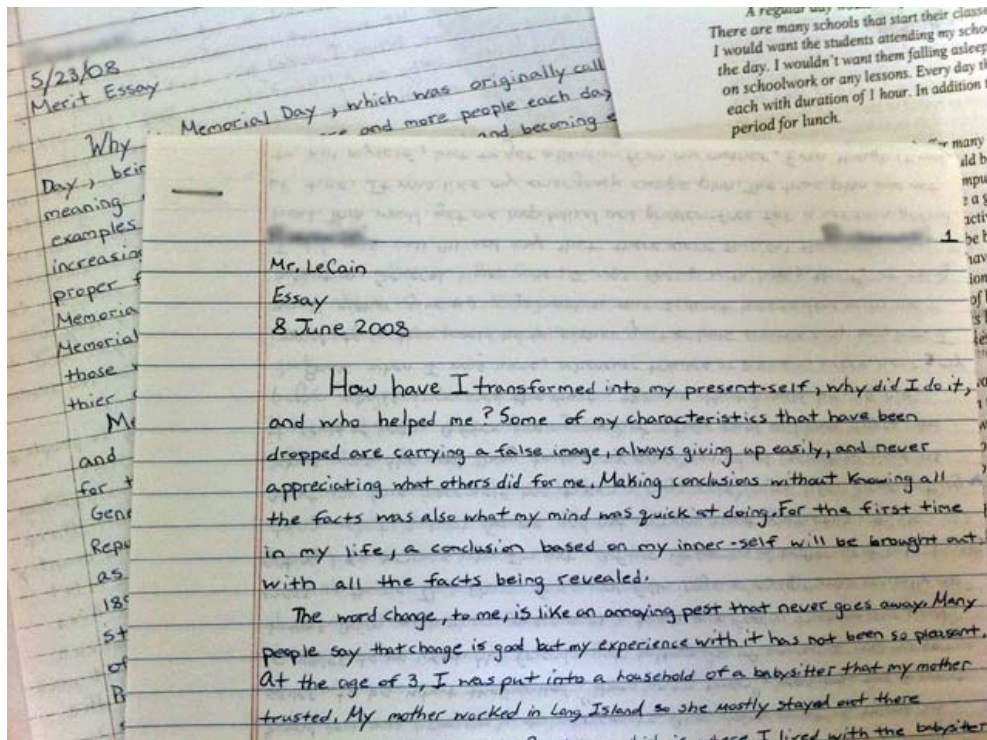
Jacob, 18, was incarcerated at the Brookwood Secure Facility for juvenile offenders. On his wall in Canarsie, he's taped up a recruitment flyer for police cadets and now dreams of becoming a cop. (Marianne McCune/WNYC)

At the Brookwood Secure Center, Jacob says kids walked with their hands folded behind their backs and were not allowed to talk during meals. He says most people there treated him like he was always going to be a nobody. But there was one teacher at the Center, named Jim LeCain, who he credits with changing his life. LeCain taught English, history, science and, Jacob said, he never gave up on anyone.

"Basically, he taught me to do some soul searching and realize who I am and what I want and know that I can do it as long as that's what I really want," Jacob said.

In a binder in his room at his Polish grandmother's house in a Canarsie housing project, Jacob has few belongings. But he keeps some of the papers he wrote for Mr. LeCain in a neat binder along with everything else that's important to him. He points to one essay with pride.

"As you see, the last sentence is, 'now it is time to use my acquired skills and show the world who the true person inside my body really is,'" Jacob read aloud.



Some of the papers Jacob wrote for a teacher at Brookwood Secure Facility. Jacob says he never thought he could write a paper before Jim LeCain made him see that he could. (Marianne McCune/WNYC)

The one-on-one relationship Jacob had has been the exception in a troubled system. Carrion wants to make it the norm for all of New York's juvenile delinquents, but when she took the job as Commissioner of the State's Office of Children and Family Services, she saw an incredible number of obstacles to overcome.

Her list of complaints ranged from the large number of kids incarcerated for low-level crimes to the lack of mental health services and rehabilitative therapies. And the statistics showed the system was failing miserably, with more than four out of five young people returning to the system.

"They've made mistakes and I understand that, but I also understand that developmentally they're not full formed yet, you know, and that they have a chance to change their lives and we have a responsibility to help them do that," Carrion said.

Since 2007, Carrion has been shaking up the juvenile justice system, with applause from some quarters and a lot of grumbling from others. First, she asked Housing Court judges to stop sending so many kids to upstate facilities and she shut down about 16 of them. Second, she began a massive culture change within the remaining two dozen facilities so that the kids who had to be locked up would have a better chance of turning their lives around.

Few know better than Alvin Lollie how difficult culture change can be.

Lollie was brought in last summer to turn around the Finger Lakes Residential Center in central New York. The Center is under Department of Justice oversight after it was found that some employees physically abused kids, among other problems. Lollie's job is to implement a new model called Sanctuary. The idea is to train staff to recognize -- and help kids address -- the various traumas that made them who they are.

"Don't see these kids as bad, see these kids as injured. Ask what happened to you, not what's wrong with you," Lollie said.

Lollie starts by showing the kids he cares. As he walks around the facility, hugging or bumping fists with young people who used to be made to keep their hands behind their backs, he passes a 15-year-old named Romeo who is wearing a cast. Lollie says Romeo broke his arm while punching a wall.

"We worked with him three days just to get him back in uniform and doing programs," Lollie said.

In the cafeteria, staff and kids talk to each other, instead of remaining silent. And employees are only supposed to use physical restraints if a youth's actions pose a danger to himself or others.



Finger Lakes Residential Center Director Alvin Lollie and all his staff wear a 'safety plan' on the flip side of their ID cards. It is a list of the three things they have decided they should do if they become upset on the job. Mr. Lollie's says, 1) close my door, meditate 'ommmm ...' 2) Talk to Kids 3) Take a walk. (Marianne McCune/WNYC)

These may sound like minor changes, but in an institutionalized environment, they're revolutionary. And Carrion has encountered some resistance because of that.

First off, the unions do not like her style.

"They say they support culture change," said Carrion. "But they haven't embraced the culture change. They haven't joined with me to say 'Listen, we need to do this differently,' they haven't."

CSEA Union spokesman Stephen Madarasz says Carrion is the problem. He says his members do want change, that they have also been dissatisfied with outcomes for the young people their job is to help. But Madarasz says Carrion has routinely blamed them for a failed system, and now she's asking them to do everything differently without enough training or resources to succeed.

"They feel very unsure of the way that they are actually operating and there's a sense that the clients have been empowered and the staff has been undermined in how you actually maintain control within the facility," said Madarasz.

Injuries among people who work directly with youth have risen over the past two years. And when employees are out, others may work double shifts.

"When people are working fatigued they tend to make mistakes, or are more likely to make mistakes," said Madarasz.

Turning placement facilities into effective therapeutic environments does require more staff and many hours of training. At Finger Lakes Residential Center, Alvin Lollie says he's been allowed to hire 60 new employees. And he says, without those new employees, there's no way he could effectively serve many more than the 60 to 70 children currently at the Center, even though the facility is designed to house about 150.

In Gladys Carrion's big picture, long-term plan, that's okay. She wants smaller, better run facilities with more staff, she said. And to pay for it, she said she wants to shut down more facilities and funnel the savings into programs that work. Ten years ago, most of the beds in residential facilities were full. Now more than a third are empty.

"The investments for far too long have been in facilities and it really should be at the front end," she said.

But diverting money from traditional facilities toward alternative, community-based programs is controversial and involves political battles with upstate legislators who want to protect jobs in their districts. After a State law passed in 2006, Carrion is required to give a year's notice before closing a facility. That means much of the money saved is tied up for a year before it can be put to other uses.

The City has resorted to suing New York State because it pays more every year to send fewer kids to upstate facilities.

"The price of placement at a limited secure state facility, which is the most common type, is roughly \$270,000 dollars per child per year. That's enough to send five students to Harvard," the Mayor said on Tuesday.

Bloomberg said the City has developed alternatives that keep young offenders in their communities and cost from \$5,000 to \$17,000. Carrion said she agreed conceptually with the Mayor's direction, but needs to see a detailed plan. She said what's important to her is that troubled youth change their lives.

As for Jacob, after a year on the outside, he is doing well. He completed his probation, he works as a stock boy in a Midtown clothing store, blocks from where he attends college studying criminal justice.

In some ways, Jacob said, being institutionalized was good for him. He was lucky enough to meet a few people who helped him figure out who he wanted to be.

But he suspects he would be better off if he had been placed in a day program while at home in New York City. As long as it were a program that worked. "If they had people who made you feel like a family," he said, "who showed you they were there."

When Jacob got out of Brookwood Secure Center, he said he felt set up to fail. He took the bus home to his grandmother's house and found, for example, that he couldn't even open a bank account with the ID he'd been given. Not to mention that he didn't know how to open a bank account, or behave in a job interview, or apply to college.

"Don't just expect me to go from a secure facility where I have no responsibilities," he said, "to out in the world where all the responsibility is on me."

One of the things Jacob keeps in his special binder: the receipt for his New York State ID.

"Something as simple as this," he said, "I did it on my own, and I'm proud of myself."

"I've heard all these stories about people failing when they come home," Jacob said. He is determined not to be one of them.

**Since the crime was committed when Jacob was a minor, his last name is being withheld to protect his privacy.*

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B Lynd from 10019

Jacob, keep up the good work!

Dec. 22 2010 10:16 AM

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