

www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bs-ed-juvenile-justice-20130416,0,15063.story

baltimoresun.com

Juvenile justice reforms: worth the wait

New laws will improve conditions for troubled youths, but there is more to be done

By Becky Wagner

1:11 PM EDT, April 16, 2013

As the legislative session closed last week, I was happy to see that we made great progress on behalf of Maryland's children. We made strides in health, child welfare and education. However, one of the standout accomplishments was in juvenile justice.

Before the General Assembly session began, juvenile justice public policy advocates came together to hammer out a five-piece legislative package aimed at right-sizing the Department of Juvenile Services and stopping the transfer of youths to the adult system. Over the coming weeks, Gov. Martin O'Malley will sign three of those bills into law.

From the drafting of the legislation to the governor signing it, the timeline seems so rapid as to be almost unreal. After all, these very same laws were on the agenda of juvenile justice advocates 15 years ago.

It is an understatement that systemic change comes in increments, and transformation is slow. For a decade and a half, we as a state missed the opportunity to make necessary changes. It is sad to think how many lives we could have helped if the system could have changed sooner — how many of those youths of 15 years ago are now incarcerated adults with shattered lives and nonexistent future prospects.

However, despite the slow pace, juvenile justice advocates have now tasted victory. New laws include one that requires the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) to report on its creation and implementation of graduated responses — a system that uses a range of sanctions and incentives that respond appropriately to the behavior exhibited by a youth. The law also mandates limited incarceration for nonviolent offenses and the creation of a task force to make recommendations on whether to eliminate the existing exclusionary offenses that automatically result in adult charges for youths.

As we move into the summer, we can take a breath, but we have to keep moving. During this legislative session, DJS reported fewer youth arrests and intakes, lower detention numbers, and improved recidivism rates. As advocates, our focus is on DJS deploying more resources toward alternatives to detention and alternatives to out-of-home placements.

A recent fiscal analysis by Advocates for Children and Youth, "The High Cost of Detaining Youth: A Juvenile Services Challenge and Opportunity," found that Maryland could save more than \$1 million per year by shifting children under 14 into alternatives to detention such as electronic monitoring, day and evening reporting centers, shelter care, and treatment foster care.

It is our hope that the use of fewer out-of-home placements will not take another 15 years to come to fruition. Moving forward, in our respective capacities — child advocates, policy experts, local and state agencies, elected officials, community members, and affected people — we need to work together and expand on our

best practices and policies. We need to learn from other states and systems that are making right decisions to keep their children, families and neighborhoods safe.

It's taken us a long time to get here, but our journey continues.

Becky Wagner is executive director of Advocates for Children and Youth. Her email is rwagner@acy.org.

 [Text NEWS to 70701 to get Baltimore Sun local news text alerts](#)

Copyright © 2013, [The Baltimore Sun](#)