

Guest column: The Missouri approach to juvenile justice would work here too, if Louisiana would give it a real chance



Mark D. Steward

Chad Davis

Last week, U.S. District Court Judge Shelly Dick issued a ruling that will allow Louisiana to move forward with its proposed plan to house adjudicated youth in a facility on the grounds of the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.

This decision contradicts everything we know about youth facilities. As the former director of the Missouri Division of Youth Services for over 17 years, with more than 40 years of experience in juvenile justice, I know firsthand that safety in juvenile facilities can only be achieved by providing rehabilitation in a therapeutic environment.

Last week, this paper ran an editorial: “Let’s get back to the Missouri Plan for Juvenile Justice, not an Angola Plan.” I couldn’t agree more.

Seventeen years ago, our not-for-profit organization, the Missouri Youth Services Institute, came to Louisiana to help the state implement the “Missouri Approach.” This is a proven method of youth rehabilitation that shifts away from the punitive and isolation models that have been utilized across the country. It provides a more holistic approach that includes structure, support, understanding and empathy in a humane and caring environment.

The Missouri Approach works. In my state, there are lower levels of violence and better recidivism rates than in most juvenile justice systems in the country. More than 90% of the youth who have been served through Missouri’s juvenile justice system do not re-enter the juvenile system or enter adult prisons.

This was not always the case. For the first century of Missouri's juvenile justice system, it was plagued by violence and suicides in a horrific prison-like environment. The conditions were so bad that in the 1960s, a juvenile judge in St. Louis refused to send youth into Missouri's juvenile justice system. It was not until the 1970s that Missouri closed its 600-bed facility for boys and 200-bed facility for girls and began establishing small therapeutic group treatment facilities. This is when I began with Missouri's juvenile justice system as the first group counselor trained to implement this new approach.

Since Missouri adopted this model — which is still used today — youth are 4 ½ times less likely to be assaulted and staff are 13 times less likely to be assaulted, compared with other states. With the Missouri Approach, isolation, including solitary confinement, is 200 times less likely to be utilized. Youth have experienced above-national-average educational gains. These significant gains can be, and have been, replicated outside of Missouri, as shown by a three-year evidence-based study conducted by the National Council of Crime and Delinquency.

Although Louisiana made efforts to implement the Missouri Approach in the past, it has never been able to fully embrace and implement the methods that have been proven to work in other states. In early 2005, my colleagues and I assisted Louisiana with implementing the Missouri Approach. It was not an easy transition, but we were making enormous progress until Hurricane Katrina.

Sadly, the progress didn't last. When I last visited the Bridge City Center for Youth in 2016, there was scant evidence that the Office of Juvenile Justice was actually using the model, rendering it ineffective.

I have seen the Missouri Approach work across the country in states that implement it with fidelity, such as Virginia, Colorado and New Mexico. Louisiana's youth are no different than

anywhere else, and certainly no different from Missouri. The strength of the walls or the height of the fences at a juvenile facility make no difference as long as staff members are able to do their jobs to maintain structure and safety.

If Louisiana moves forward with the plan to send youth in OJJ custody to Angola, I have no doubt that there will be catastrophic consequences. Young people cannot learn positive attitudes in an environment like Angola. "Scared straight" programs have never been shown to be a deterrent to future criminal behavior. The same problems will continue until OJJ changes the way it works with the youth in its custody.

Ultimately, the purpose of the juvenile justice system is to help young people return to their home communities ready to lead healthy and productive lives. Accomplishing that goal will be virtually impossible if the state moves ahead with this plan.

Instead, a serious effort to return to a therapeutic approach is the best option for everyone who wants a safe and effective juvenile justice system in Louisiana.

Mark D. Steward is the former director of Missouri's Division of Youth Services, and the current director of Missouri Youth Services Institute.