

The Florida Juvenile Justice Initiative

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In its 2003-2004 proposed budget, the State of Florida suggested reducing or eliminating funding for some of the state's most successful community-based programs to treat at-risk youth. Among the proposed cuts were:

- Elimination of day treatment programs that serve more than 3,000 youth each year,
- Elimination of supervised home detention services,
- Reductions in juvenile crime prevention program funding, including gender specific services for girls, and
- Reductions in funding for programs that provide social services and shelter for more than 24,000 youths who are runaways, habitually truant, ungovernable, or homeless, and their families.

All told, the proposed budget would have cut more than \$60 million in funds for local prevention and treatment programs and shifted the burden of funding for more than \$64.3 million in pre-trial detention, misdemeanor probation and intake services from the state to counties. The Children's Campaign, Inc. – a nonpartisan statewide organization that works to ensure voter, candidate, and community attention to Florida's 3.6 million children – estimates that “the proposed cuts and fund shifts would have resulted in the disenfranchisement of as many as 35,000-40,000 children in Florida from vital services.” Consequently, more youth would be forced into programs normally reserved for serious offenders, and thousands more children would be returned to the state's already troubled child welfare system.

These cuts sounded familiar to the Florida Juvenile Justice Initiative, a collaboration among the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA - a duPont Fund eligible organization), the Children's Campaign, youth and family advocacy organizations, and juvenile justice service providers, volunteers, networks, and associations. The Juvenile Justice Initiative (henceforth, “the Initiative”) had been working to educate politicians and the public about the need for and value of community-based prevention and treatment programs for youth after similar budget considerations in 2001.

Though based in Washington, D.C., CWLA has a specific interest in Florida. The national nonprofit, which develops and promotes policies and programs to protect children and strengthen families, has more than 1,100 member agencies, including more than 50 in Florida. Its president and CEO, Shay Bilchik, served 16 years as assistant state attorney in Miami, Florida, where he had supervisory authority over child protection and juvenile delinquency related activities. (He also administered the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the U.S. Department of Justice from 1994 to 2000, before moving to CWLA in 2000.)

Coming Together for Florida's Youth

"Florida was facing two specific challenges with regard to juvenile justice," says Bilchik. "First, state leaders faced the challenge of preserving proven support services for youth that were appropriately targeted to their needs and of finding ways to offer services that were missing - all in a difficult economic climate. Second, people and organizations in the state were beginning to recognize the need to create political will and public will that would result in greater support for children, youth, and family programming through better public policy. The duPont Fund was one of those organizations. Some of their grantees had just participated in a study of the needs of Florida youth, and the Fund recognized that an effective use of money and effort might transcend direct service support for individual agencies and programs; it might engage political and public leaders in new and different conversations about what works best for the state's youth. At that time, we also came into contact with the Children's Campaign, which had a demonstrated track record of leading public education campaigns and of creating public momentum around the data available on at-risk youth. There was, as they say, an alignment of the stars."

According to Bilchik, there were a number of good reasons for CWLA to get involved with the public education campaign: Florida, the fourth-largest state, is a crucial trend-setter for the rest of the country, and this was an opportunity to increase awareness of youth needs; the research that had been done by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (another duPont Fund eligible organization) demonstrated that prevention and intervention activities had been working in Florida, and that shifting their funds would undermine that progress; and public polling indicated that



*Shay Bilchik, president
and CEO, Child Welfare
League of America, Inc.*

Photo courtesy of CWLA

the people of Florida wanted to continue community-based prevention and intervention strategies, but their wishes were not being communicated to the decision-makers.

At the time of the grant, the Children's Campaign and Barcelo & Company recently had conducted a statewide poll to measure public opinion about juvenile crime and effective treatment. The results of this Florida Juvenile Justice Benchmark Survey, released on March 1, 2002, were compelling: Every demographic group polled, across party affiliation, age, income, and ethnicity, expressed support for existing and expanded community-based options for at-risk youth. By a ratio of nearly four-to-one, frequent voters in Florida favored programs that would provide recreation, education, crisis intervention, counseling, and other prevention services over programs and options that focused on punishment. Overall, more than half of Florida voters favored balance between the "front end" and "back end" of the system. Eighty-four percent of voters believed that "investing in children

today would reduce the need for prisons tomorrow." The poll showed that voters wanted "a system that treats all children equally in spite of class and economic differences, a system that provides appropriate, graduated sanctions matched to specific offenses, a system where children and parents in crisis have access to services and programs that redirect, rather than merely punish."¹

Research also supported the call for community-based prevention programs. In 1993, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency published *Juveniles in State Custody: Prospects for Community-Based Care of Troubled Adolescents*, which reported that 31 percent of youth incarcerated in 14 states could be placed in less secure settings without causing a public safety risk, and that incarcerating youth actually increased the chance that they would commit more crimes.² A 2000 study by the American Youth Policy Forum - *Less Hype, More Help: Reducing Juvenile Crime, What Works - and What Doesn't* - corroborated the research that incarceration can exacerbate juvenile crime and that for "youth who do not pose an immediate threat to public safety, most of the winning strategies work with young people in their own homes and communities, rather than institutions."³

In January 2001, CWLA applied for and received a one-year grant of \$152,874 from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund to support its outreach work in Florida with the Initiative. The grant described the Initiative as being designed to "halt cost-shifting in the state budget from prevention and treatment to corrections" and to

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“mobilize public support for a positive youth development approach to preventing and remediating youth infractions.” The Initiative also received funding from the Allegany Franciscan Foundation and the Edyth Bush Charitable Foundation in Florida.

In its first phase, the Juvenile Justice Initiative launched a “positive message campaign” based on the survey results. Children’s Campaign, Inc., and its local partners used print and electronic media to disseminate information to their constituents, the public, and the media. A CWLA staff person worked with the more than 50 member organizations and had their constituents and supporters generate emails and written letters to key elected officials about the research. The Children’s Campaign sent out press releases to reporters and editorial writers and placed ads in *Florida Trend* to inform business and industry leaders about the proposed cuts and their possible effects. The group also held televised “town meetings” to rally support.

“CWLA and Children’s Campaign added a layer of political science that had not existed to what the child prevention and intervention industry was already doing well - working to improve the lives of Florida’s children,” says Roy Miller, President, Children’s Campaign, Inc.

CWLA received a second duPont Fund grant of \$334,598 in September 2001 to continue and expand upon its statewide public education campaign regarding juvenile justice issues in Florida. In expanding its outreach, the Initiative has gained the support of parents and youth who are served by local providers. Their testimony at the state capitol has made a strong impression on legislators. The Initiative estimates that its work has exposed 65,000 key community members (people with spheres of influence that include decision-makers) and hundreds of thousands of frequent voters about the benefits of community-based prevention, treatment, and intervention services.

While increased exposure is important, the Initiative maintains the position that its work for change must be fact-based and educational - not political. “CWLA’s role, as a national partner, has been to provide perspective and input to keep the campaign focused on the needs of the children and what works best to address those needs,” Bilchik says. “We have strived not to point fingers or look for scapegoats for the challenges facing Florida’s juvenile justice system, but to enlighten those engaged in meeting those challenges by offering them real information and new ways of framing the issues.”

“The Initiative helped maximize our ability to get the

message out while taking the high road in garnering support for our programs,” says one partner. “CWLA and Children’s Campaign, Inc., maintained an issues-based standard and used mathematical formulas to figure out how we could best invest and target our resources. All the while, they used language and polls that the public – and the voters – understood.”

Seeing Results

The Initiative’s efforts during Florida’s 2003 legislative sessions resulted in a number of significant policy outcomes. The legislature restored full funding to a number of providers who were slated to

be cut. Public pressure also preserved state funding for juvenile assessment centers and detention services. “While at the beginning of the session juvenile justice public safety programs were slated to be cut by nearly 9 percent,” says Miller, “the final budget was reduced by less than 1 percent – a remarkable improvement and turnaround.”

In addition, the legislature approved a new study by the Office of Program Policy and Analysis and Government Accountability and the Auditor General’s Office to look at the need for state-funded juvenile prison beds. Legislators had been using a ten-year-old study to justify their

proposals to increase the number of beds. But, as reported in the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, “the push [for new beds] was not supported by the facts, the [state’s] own statistics now show. Juvenile crime rates declined more than 12 percent between 1997 and 2000. And legislative forecasts used to justify the bed increase turned out to be incorrect. Actual crime rates were lower than projected each year between 1997 and 2000.”⁴

The Initiative’s work also has supported and won a small per diem increase for residential providers and fewer reductions in aftercare funding and the number of juvenile probation officers.

“Nevertheless,” says one partner in the Initiative, “a lot of small providers’ programs did get cut, and some nonprofits got lost in the campaign. For that reason a lot of small providers don’t support our work as a coalition. But in some ways that’s why we are sticking with it – because we want to support the smaller providers. We want them to know that we’re not just looking out for our own organizations, but for all kids in the state of Florida.



Roy Miller, president of the Children’s Campaign, Inc., releases results of a benchmark survey on public attitudes about juvenile crime and effective treatment. The survey, which showed strong, bipartisan support for community-based programs for at-risk youth, provided the foundation for a statewide public education campaign.

Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Children’s Campaign, Inc.

We know the best way to do it is by combining forces.”

Supporting Nonprofits

Other partners agree that the Children’s Campaign’s experience and leadership have enabled the Initiative to be more nimble and efficient than each of the volunteers, agencies, and community leaders could have been on their own. In much the same way that the Nonprofit Center of Northeast Florida (see story on page 16) offers technical support for nonprofit organizations so that they can focus on program delivery, the Initiative has offered its partners the technical support they need to pursue important education efforts without diverting their focus from serving the needs of Florida’s youth.

Members of the Initiative say their involvement has benefited their own nonprofit and volunteer organizations significantly. “We’ve found our voice,” says one member of the Initiative. “We’ve gained knowledge and sophistication about the best ways to educate and mobilize our constituents and to support our own organization, as well as other organizations that are working to serve youth. We’ve learned the value of consultation and collaboration in terms of magnifying our message.”

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The sense of camaraderie and collegiality among prevention and treatment programs and volunteer organizations that might have found themselves competing for decreased funding or for the attention and support of political leaders largely results from the Children’s Campaign’s slogan: “Who’s for Kids and Who’s Just Kidding?”

The Initiative’s emphasis on “doing what works best” and “doing what the public wants” for youth is part of its call for accountability in the juvenile justice system. The partners are committed to the idea that “[e]ffective juvenile justice policy depends on giving the right kids the right help at the right time. It requires a commitment to balance, fairness, and accountability.”⁵ Community-based prevention, intervention, and treatment programs may not be the easiest options to pursue, but the Initiative is helping to inform voters that they are options that can work well for youth, can be more cost-effective than incarceration, and can satisfy the public’s demand for fair treatment of at-risk youth.

While CWLA and the Children's Campaign are pleased with the results the Initiative has had, they recognize that juvenile justice challenges are ongoing and widespread. "We would like to transfer the experiences we've had in Florida to other states," says Bilchik.

"The actual initiative may not look the same in a different place, but every state needs to be thinking about the ways to leverage public and political will into better policies for children. And funders in these states will need to be bold and courageous enough to support public education efforts that can shape more enlightened dialogue around the issues."



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1 "A Fair, Balanced, and Accountable Approach to Crime Requires More than Punishment," Children's Campaign, *Campaign Update* 21 February 2003. (www.iamforkids.org).

2 B. Krisberg, *et al.* National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 1993.

3 This study was funded by the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, written by Richard Mendel, and conducted in partnership with a broad coalition that included CWLA, the National Urban League, the National Crime Prevention Council, the National Coalition for Juvenile Justice, the National League of Cities, and the National Collaboration for Youth. See "Groundbreaking Study Reveals 'Get Tough' Approaches Fail to Reduce Juvenile Crime, Offers Approaches Proven Far More Effective" at <http://www.cwla.org/advocacy/jjpn000614.htm>.

4 "Group Calls for Funding Moratorium on Commitment Beds" by Ron Hurtibise, *Daytona Beach News-Journal* 5 May 2003.

5 Children's Campaign, Campaign Newsletter 25 April 2003.