

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/from-the-show-me-state-a-juvenile-justice-reform-model-worth-a-close-look>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund, recently blogged on the [Huffington Post](#) advocating nationwide adoption of the Missouri Model, a treatment-oriented approach to serving youth in placement that has received a great deal of attention both positive and negative in recent years.

Under this model, which emphasizes skill development and youth engagement, kids are placed in small, homelike facilities; work with staff who are specially trained in therapeutic approaches; and participate in programming that ranges from individual and group counseling to sports and other recreational activities. The model represents a dramatic shift from the punitive approach to serving youth in placement that has been dominant for two decades. Some critics argue, however, that it can only work in a jurisdiction like Missouri, where youth in placement are lower-risk and commit significantly more minor offenses than those in other particularly urban jurisdictions.

This argument is flawed for two reasons. First, as Ms. Edelman points out, most of the youth in Missouri's placement system come from St. Louis and Kansas City, both of which are urban areas. The second reason, on which Ms. Edelman also touches, is that the model has already been replicated in other jurisdictions including Washington, DC, which is unquestionably an urban setting.

The District's Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS), which serves all youth in placement, began transforming its institutional care to bring it in line with the Missouri Model in 2006. Last summer, the agency opened a new Missouri-modeled facility called [New Beginnings](#). Vera's [Center on Youth Justice](#) is currently assessing the implementation of DYRS's variation of the model, called the D.C. Model. While it is still too early to conduct an outcome evaluation, trends reported by DYRS from the past few years are promising. According to a recent report released by the agency, 30 percent of youth released from secure custody in FY 2004 were reconvicted as a juvenile or adult within a year of release; by FY 2007, the rate had dropped to 16 percent.

We cannot determine whether the Missouri Model works in other urban settings until it is evaluated. Given the encouraging trends in DC, however, and the model's grounding in principles and program elements demonstrated to be effective for youth in a variety of settings, there is good reason to believe that the benefits of this approach extend well beyond Missouri.

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