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Notebook

We thought we were helping troubled teens

By Ben Krull

When I tell people that I am a lawyer working on juvenile delinquency cases, they usually commend me for choosing a socially useful career. But ever since the release of reports detailing the horrid treatment of teenagers at four New York juvenile detention facilities, I have been wary of talking about my job.

For 20 years I have worked in New York Family Court, doing legal research for judges who hear juvenile delinquency cases. I take pride in helping judges conduct fair proceedings, which hopefully encourage youths to respect the justice system.

When sentencing a teenager who has broken the law, one of the goals is to provide them with the services they need to change their behavior and better their prospects. This is difficult, as many of the teens have mental illnesses, and come from impoverished, broken homes, where they have been exposed to drugs and violence.

Most juveniles convicted in Family Court receive services while living in their home communities, while others are sent away to detention centers for a year or more. Before a youth is sentenced, social workers and psychologists produce extensive reports aimed at formulating a service plan. Court hearings are held to determine the best course of action.

I assumed that the people working in our juvenile facilities were as committed as we were in Family Court to giving detainees a chance at redemption. But recent federal and state investigations have revealed a far different story.

Instead of the well-intentioned treatment I thought they were getting, juveniles in detention facilities repeatedly face physical abuse, which has resulted in concussions, broken bones and lost teeth. Staff members regularly handcuff detainees behind their backs, and force them to lie face down on the floor, for infractions such as sneaking an extra cookie or slamming a door. And teens suffering from bi-polar disorder, posttraumatic stress syndrome and drug addiction receive infrequent or no treatment.

In Family Court we were so unaware about what was going on in juvenile facilities that we made a point of never referring to them as prisons, since prisons are associated more with punishment than rehabilitation. When I consider all of the effort and public dollars that goes into deciding how to help our most troubled teens, I feel as if my co-workers and I are akin to employees of a charity, who learn that donations have been diverted into corrupt hands.

State officials are working to correct the problems in our juvenile facilities, and promises have been made to provide more programs that allow youths to receive rehabilitation services while remaining at home. Still, it is disillusioning to know that I have been part of a system that puts kids in prison, where they learn contempt for the law and are drained of hope.

Ben Krull is an attorney in Lower Manhattan's Family Court.

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