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A march for juvenile justice

Residents urge Maryland officials to improve community services for young offenders

By Julie Bykowicz

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Kory Johnson said he has never been in trouble with the law, but the 15-year-old East Baltimore resident and his mother marched yesterday to call attention to Maryland's "broken" juvenile justice system.

"Punishment without rehabilitation is not the answer," said Francine Tucker, Kory's mother.

The group of about 120 marched from the Baltimore City Juvenile Justice Center on Gay Street to the state Department of Juvenile Services headquarters on Fayette Street, chanting "juvenile reform" to the tune of "We Shall Overcome." They shouted, "Keep children safe," as they passed the city's adult courthouses.

The march's organizers, Advocates for Children and Youth, said they want the state to spend money improving community-based services for juvenile delinquents instead of building new jail-like facilities for them.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Juvenile Services said yesterday that the agency is trying to expand its community services. This week, DJS announced a contract with the University of Maryland to expand two of its most successful community-based therapy programs.

"We 'get it' and we're 'doing it,'" state Secretary of Juvenile Services Donald W. DeVore said in a statement about those programs.

In a speech after the march, some of the organizers acknowledged that juvenile justice has improved under DeVore - but they said the agency has a long way to go.

"DJS is doing some good things," said Cameron E. Miles, a mentor to teenage boys for more than a decade and organizing director of Advocates for Children and Youth. "But they're not doing enough."

Angela Conyers Johnese, juvenile justice director for the advocates, said that DJS "isn't working fast enough."

She said the two programs DJS plans to expand have slots for about 500 youths, while about 11,000 kids are under DJS supervision at any given time.

Johnese said Maryland should look to Missouri as a role model. She said that state's intense focus on services for children who leave juvenile facilities has helped keep the recidivism rate in the first year

after release to 8 percent. By contrast, she said, 38 percent of youths leaving Maryland facilities return to the juvenile justice system in the first year after their arrest.

Department of Juvenile Services officials did not attend the march yesterday, but new banners at both the Justice Center and at headquarters proclaimed "DJS - We're doing it!" Smaller type on the banners said "Maryland Model, Going Beyond Missouri."

The parents and children marching yesterday weren't familiar with the specifics of Maryland's juvenile justice system, let alone Missouri's. They had a simpler message for DJS.

"The system is messed up," said Justin Harris, 15. "Kids should not be stuck in prison for petty crimes. There should be more programs to keep kids off the streets."

Justin is in Miles' Mentoring Male Teens program and wore a T-shirt that read "Failure is not an Option" as he helped carry a banner during the march.

At 25, Edward "Taz" Dixon is no longer a juvenile, but he pointed to Justin and other younger marchers as the reason he came out yesterday.

"That's our future right there," he said. "This is me being part of the voice."

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