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Barbed wire is on the way out in Illinois' new juvenile justice system

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CHICAGO - At Illinois' largest maximum-security youth prison, metal grids obstruct window views of basketball courts surrounded by coiled razor-wire fences.

Here at the Illinois Youth Center, just as in adult prisons, there are wardens. Roughly 230 youths, mostly ages 15 to 19, live in stark cells.

For more than three decades, the Illinois Department of Corrections had been responsible both for the state's adult convicts and for juveniles serving time here. But this summer, in a swing of the pendulum away from an emphasis on punishment and back toward a focus on reform, Illinois created a new Department of Juvenile Justice.

While using the same buildings and the same funding the Department of Corrections provided for young people, the new department and acting Director Kurt Friedenauer hope to change totally the culture of juvenile incarceration.

"With kids we have to lock up because of their behavior, our goal is to motivate them, not suppress them," said Malcolm Young, executive director of the John Howard Association of Illinois, a prison advocacy group that helped drive creation of the new agency. "We want to stimulate them with textures, colors, softer sounds, brightness and even food they like, not stultify them in a cold, closed, hard, flat uncaring setting."

Friedenauer plans to train his staff to help their charges control their impulses and learn from their mistakes. Rather than sanction them with confinement, he hopes to use mistakes as opportunities to teach better behavior.

He said he hopes to beef up education and create a system of support and supervision after release, so young people don't end up back in prison.

"In years gone by Illinois was considered one of the leaders in juvenile justice. The first juvenile court in the world was in Cook County," Friedenauer said. "Over the years Illinois' status was dim. Illinois was relegated to the back of the class. The creation of the new agency is a monumental step."

Illinois figures from June 2005 show roughly 1,400 youths are incarcerated. About 48 percent of juveniles released in 2002 returned to juvenile facilities within three years. Illinois spends roughly \$70,000 per youth, per year.

By contrast a 2005 report shows that the Missouri Department of Youth Programs spent \$57,169 per bed to house 1,205 young people. Though Missouri measures a shorter period of time, less than two years, the report put Missouri's youth recidivism rate at 7.1 percent.

Only seven of Missouri's 32 residential facilities are fenced in and secured, said Paul Bolerjack, interim director of the Missouri Division of Youth Services. A case manager follows kids from the moment they enter the system until they leave. There are no barbed-wire fences, no cells, no bolted furniture.

"Oh no, oh no," Bolerjack said. "No bars anywhere. Ever."

Instead youths sleep in cottages with couches and carpeting. Outside, fences are curved at the top to prevent escapes but not make kids feel imprisoned, Bolerjack said. Staff members refer to young people as students. The youths call staffers by name.

"One way to sum it up is that almost all bad behaviors are the result of anger," Bolerjack said. "The last thing you want to do is add to the anger."

After advocates highlighted the contrast between the two neighboring states, Illinois state Sen. John Cullerton and Rep. Annazette Collins, both Chicago Democrats, sponsored a bill last year to separate youths from adults in corrections. Gov. Rod Blagojevich signed it into law in November.

Cullerton said under Blagojevich there was "a change in attitude" that moved away from locking juveniles up as a tough response to high crime rates.

"When we look at other states, we see their rehabilitation rates are better. People figured out we could save money in the long run," Cullerton said. "We got that part from the governor's office - `No more money will be spent. If you could do something better with it, fine.'"

Not everybody hails the creation of a new department. Henry Bayer, executive director of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Illinois Council 31, which represents roughly 1,500 juvenile prison workers, said the agency is no more than "good window dressing."

"We believe that the problems that existed in the juvenile division of the Department of Corrections stemmed mainly from the lack of funding and the lack of staff," Bayer said. "Our concern, from our members' perspective, is not only about a lack of

services but the impact this will have on their work lives and ability to have upward mobility."

The agency is the latest step in Illinois' juvenile justice history, dating to the Juvenile Court Act of 1899. The first separate agency, the Illinois Youth Commission, was created in 1953 to operate residential facilities with outdoor recreation and extracurricular activities such as band and choir, said Elizabeth Clarke, president of the Juvenile Justice Initiative.

But as the adult corrections population grew, its department eventually took over the education, parole and training of staff at youth facilities, Clarke said.

In June two reports, by the John Howard Association and an independent team of experts, detailed problems in that system.

At the Illinois Youth Center, John Howard advocates found a need for additional programs and support for youths who left. They suggested more family contact and additional teachers.

"Quality of its staff is crucial" and "education will be a core service," the state Juvenile Justice Transition Team found in its report.

Change is not yet visible inside the Illinois Youth Center, which sits among cornfields across from a golf course. In stark cells, steel furniture is bolted down, pastel paint scratched off.

In isolation rooms, daylight trickles in through a small window too high to look out of. Boys peer out of the thick, barred glass of cell doors.

"You can see there was a very strong emphasis here on security. Security at this facility may not look anything like this down the road," Friedenauer said.

At one time, roughly 40 youths could live in isolation cells for as many as 30 days, punished for fights or violence against the staff. As therapeutic programs develop and staff training improves, Friedenauer expects to scale back the use of confinement. "There will come a day where confinement as it exists today will be a thing of history," he said.

Assistant Warden of Operations John Rita said that two years ago, there was no emphasis on programs at the facility where there were many more youths than there are today.

"Let's face it, the other way does not work," Rita said. "I would defy anyone to argue that it does."

Since the new agency's launch July 1, advocates are cautiously optimistic.

Sarah Schriber, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union, noted that changing structure is "relatively easy."

"It's much more difficult to change philosophy and culture," she said.

Bernardine Dohrn, director of the Children and Family Justice Center at the Northwestern University School of Law, called the new department "a real historic opportunity."

"It has the possibility of catapulting Illinois back into a national or international leader," Dohrn said. "Or just change the name on the door - there is also that possibility."