

## SNG-Nowlan-Prison as last resort for youth-4-23-12

Too many delinquent youth in state care

By Jim Nowlan

Decades ago, when I was a young man in a rural county, I recall the phrase about a juvenile delinquent: “We can’t handle him here, so let’s send him up to St. Charles (then and now a youth ‘reformatory’ or center).” We still do that too often, at a cost of \$86,000 per year for each of the 1,100 young people in the state’s seven youth centers.

Seventy percent of the youth are in the statewide system for nonviolent crimes or for technical violations of their parole. Better to develop less expensive programs at home for the non-violent among the offending young people.

Last week I visited the Illinois Youth Center at Kewanee, to get at least a feel for life behind the razor wire that loops around the fenced compound. Maybe not a prison, but sure not summer camp.

Kewanee is somewhat different from the state’s other youth centers, as it is the only one for young people who have committed sexual offenses or have significant mental health problems.

I interviewed Superintendent Thomas Kim, who has master’s degrees in social work and business. A compact, confident man, Kim has two Army National Guard tours of Iraq and Afghanistan behind him, with two Bronze Stars and a Combat Medical Badge to show for it.

“Some day they will get out,” says Kim of the 240 youth age 14-21 at his facility, “and the better prepared they are to re-enter society, the less likely they will become a

public safety threat.” And although many of the young people are in the Kewanee center for serious offenses, the typical resident will be out in an average of 12 months.

Numbers in the juvenile justice system’s centers have been coming down in recent years, and Gov. Pat Quinn proposes to close youth centers at Joliet and Murphysboro because of excess capacity.

We need to divert even more from the expensive centers to their home communities, generally for substance abuse and mental health services, and at a cost of less than \$10,000 per young person.

Several programs are showing promise for those in the centers, or because youth are being diverted from the centers. In June, Kewanee will inaugurate an on-line education program, which will expand the available courses by multiples of what can be offered inside the center’s school. Each young person at Kewanee will ultimately have access to his own computer, and will be able to proceed at whatever educational level and pace works for him.

Another promising program is called Aftercare, which provides support from the day a young person is assigned to the juvenile justice system and on through his or her later parole period. At present, most paroled youth are under the control of adult prison system officers, each of whom has a case-load of more than 100.

Probably overwhelmed, these officers lack the time to oversee graduated penalties short of recommitment to youth centers for parole violators who miss curfew, for example. Thus the officers tend to have them recommitted to the centers at the first infraction.

Under Aftercare, specialists in working with youth, rather than adult system parole officers, have case-loads of 24 youth each. The specialists stay with the youth from entry into the system until exit. They provide positive but firm support and assist in finding post-commitment residential placements and services. Aftercare is limited to Cook County at present, but the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice is seeking support to spread the Aftercare program system wide this coming year.

Yet another initiative is Redeploy Illinois, this offered by the Illinois Department of Human Services. The program offers financial incentives to counties that pledge to reduce their commitments of juveniles to the youth centers by at least 25 percent. The funding can be used to provide services locally. In 2010, the counties participating diverted more than half of 347 potential commitments from the state system and claimed \$9 million in avoided state costs.

There will always be a need for some state youth centers, for delinquents who resist rehabilitation and present a threat to public safety. And I am sure that in my brief visit to the Kewanee Youth Center, I failed to pierce the veil of what really goes on inside. I came away, nevertheless, with a strong sense that positive programming is available for the many of the youth. Now, if we can reduce the numbers committed in the first place, real dollars can be saved and more services can be focused on those who remain in the centers.