

It takes a village. . . .

By Jim Nowlan

Ogle County State’s Attorney John B. “Ben” Roe is making a name for himself by keeping people out of prison, rather than for “throwing the book at them.” Roe and a team of professionals funded in part by the MacArthur Foundation of Chicago are diverting hundreds of troubled juveniles from the court system. And they say it’s paying off in reduced crime and lower numbers in “the system” of courts, jails, and scary juvenile prisons.

The idealistic 35-year-old Roe is a former staffer at a program for troubled youth in Ogle County, south of Rockford. He followed that job with a stint as an assistant prosecuting attorney, whose responsibilities included juveniles, where the first time Roe saw a kid was in court—and his job was to put the youngster away. It made no sense to Roe.

“Studies show,” says Roe, “that 75 percent of youngsters who have spent time in a juvenile detention facility will end up back in prison later in life.”

Roe, veteran probation officer Greg Martin and others on a county juvenile justice council start with the schools to identify and work with youngsters at-risk of getting into trouble.

When a youngster does commit vandalism, drug offenses or whatever, the council swings into further action. The simple and easy path would be to charge the youngster with a felony (damage over \$300 constitutes a felony). Ogle County avoids the easy path.

Instead, every juvenile case reported by police is assessed promptly by mental health and community specialists. And if, for example, diversion from the court system is seen as the best course in a vandalism case, the ideal first step in the diversion process is victim-offender counseling.

“There is an unbelievable dynamic here,” says Roe, “as the youngster must confront face-to-face the victim of his or her damaging actions.”

“You know how much this cost me?” asks the victim of the youngster. “Why me?” The youngster is almost always without an answer.

After the session, a mediator works out a proposal, which might entail cleaning up the damage, doing public service work, or making monetary restitution.

If a youngster completes the agreed upon tasks in the allotted time, the case is closed, and at age 17 the information about the offense is automatically expunged from court records. (Few realize that even before a case reaches court, the police report information about arrest and fingerprinting becomes part of a court record, and can pop up years later when a person seeks a job, unless expunged.)

Other tools available to the juvenile justice council include substance abuse treatment; “community impact panels,” where a range of community leaders meet with offenders, and cognitive behavior groups, in which a therapist reviews with the offender the steps he or she went through prior to committing the offense.

Even in cases that are not diverted from the court system, a prompt assessment of the offender is conducted; the therapist is even present at the arraignment in court.

Through a memorandum of understanding, the prosecutor’s office agrees not to use information elicited in the assessment. And indeed, public defenders often learn valuable

information about their client that they would not otherwise have. Sometimes the assessment results in dismissal of the case, directing it instead to the diversion process.

At other times, court supervision is recommended rather than probation, which keeps the youngster from becoming a ward of the court and labeled a delinquent.

Of 500 police contacts with minors in Ogle County since 2008, 70 percent have been diverted out of court and only 5 percent of those kids have been re-arrested. Prior to that, much higher percentages of cases went to the court system and re-arrests were higher as well, says Roe, although no one kept such data before 2008.

Roe notes that diversion costs less than \$400 per youngster, whereas the figure is more than \$1,200 for those going through the court system.

“We call it being smart, not soft, on crime,” Roe says.

The MacArthur Foundation provides funding, for example, for training of probation officers on functional family therapy. A probation officer can take the intensive training and go into a home and work with the whole family, which is often where a big part of the problem lies.

But can a program that appears to work in a rural county of 55,000 people with a strong sense of community be replicated on the mean streets of an urban setting?

Roe thinks so. He points to New York City, where he believes similar concepts have been applied effectively.

The goal of the MacArthur Foundation is to see the models being developed in Ogle County, New York City and other sites around the country replicated widely. Will other counties have the resources and the community support to buy into diversion away

from the courts for troubled teens? Ben Roe and his team are placing much effort, and MacArthur is betting big dollars that the model will sell elsewhere.

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Nowlan is a columnist for the Small Newspaper Group. This column appeared earlier in the Kankakee Daily-Journal and other Small newspapers.