

Polk County makes progress on juvenile justice

Brigitte Black and Denny Coon 11:08 p.m. CST December 18, 2014



(Photo: Katherine Klingseis/The Register)

Over a year ago on these pages, we, as pastors and lay leaders of A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy (AMOS), lamented the alarming increases in the filings of delinquency and detention holds on Polk County juveniles as reported in a state-sponsored study on juvenile justice. In particular, we were concerned about the disproportionate impact that was having on youth of color. A recent spate of news stories, government studies and the tragic events of Ferguson renew our concerns.

There are signs of hope, however, and an opportunity for a new era of thinking about our justice system:

- A new statewide advisory committee just released their study on juvenile justice and it shows growing momentum for a better juvenile justice system. Unfortunately, of the six counties studied, Polk County was among the highest in increases in detention holds, petition filings and disproportionate minority contact of our youth. However, those numbers are down over the last reported year and, if we take seriously the report's recommendations, that trend could continue. We applaud the efforts that have been made by many to reverse the upward trend.
- A Developing Brain, Developing Accountability Conference organized by AMOS, Blank Children's Hospital, Des Moines University, Polk County Health Department and many others, was recently held at the Iowa Events Center, with nearly 800 registered participants. The conference demonstrated the need to create practices that follow the latest brain science. Institutions that have done so show dramatically improved outcomes for kids. We can do the same in Des Moines!
- A school mediation effort launched by AMOS and Iowa Mediation Services has expanded from three schools to six. This effort teaches middle school students how to resolve conflicts peacefully before they lead to suspensions, expulsions or criminal charges. Dozens of young people have been through this process and school administrators have whole-heartedly endorsed it.
- Polk County voters endorsed (as did AMOS) the need for a new county courthouse to provide a safer and more appropriate space for juveniles and their families.
- Retired Des Moines Police Chief Judy Bradshaw, to her credit, established a task force to study juvenile justice more closely in Des Moines after our Iowa View column ran in The Register. That task force is continuing thanks to Acting DMPD Chief Douglas Harvey.

We can't stop now. Des Moines is about to hire a new police chief. Given recent events in Ferguson, AMOS is urging the city to look at current best practices of modern policing like problem-oriented policing, training on unconscious bias and early intervention systems to identify problematic behaviors of officers. These practices have helped other cities avoid violence like Ferguson.

We can do it, Des Moines! Our words on these pages have enflamed the passions of many, but like the prophet Amos, we must speak truth to power so that "justice will roll like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

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