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People Making A Difference

Strategies for Youth Provides Police Training to Reduce Juvenile Arrests

by Marion Mattingly

An Interview with Lisa Thureau

Lisa Thureau started Strategies for Youth (SFY) after working for more than 20 years on youth issues, the last ten at the Juvenile Justice Center at Suffolk University Law School in Boston. Thureau is an anthropologist and attorney by training: she has a degree in anthropology from Barnard, an M.A. from Columbia in Anthropology and Law, and a J.D. from Cardozo School of Law. While at the Center, Thureau sued a police department for the systematic violation of youths' civil rights. In the course of the suit, she realized most police had little or no training on how to work with teens. Thureau also came to believe that, except for lawsuits, juvenile justice reformers were focusing primarily on post-arrest advocacy and not enough on strategies that would keep kids out of trouble in the first place. To fill this gap, Thureau began Strategies for Youth, leaving Suffolk University in 2008 to devote herself full time to building the program. Police training, which departments can contract for with SFY, is preceded by an assessment of police-youth interactions and involves interviews of both police and youth, as well as inventories of the availability of

See SFY, page 14

Juvenile Justice Should Not Be for Profit

H. Ted Rubin

Israel Bans Private For-Profit Prisons

As I was working to update more than 40 of my Juvenile Justice Update articles for a pending compilation, a next book to be known as *Juvenile Justice: Policies, Practices, and Programs 2*, I came across a startling Israeli Supreme Court Decision. That Court held in late 2009 that private for-profit prisons were unconstitutional.

I had been surfing Israeli juvenile justice to find, distill, and tack on developments there to add as a note to my 2004 article in this publication, *Juvenile Justice in Israel: A Heart and a Soul*, when I came across this decision, and the lights went on. The decision, plus awareness of certain other juvenile justice matters pertinent to for-profit services in the U.S., prompted me to place in writing an old concern—that for-profit facilities are not good for us.

The Israeli court ruled 8-1 that for the state to transfer authority for managing a prison to a private contractor whose aim is monetary profit would severely violate the prisoners' basic human rights to dignity and freedom. The court found that a private prison would hold invasive authority over prisoners, and that deprivation of one's liberty loses its legitimacy when it takes place in a prison whose purpose is to make money. The

decision overturned a Knesset law that had authorized establishing private prisons, and enjoined any use of the initial prison that had already been built but had not yet opened. It was reported the government would purchase the prison and reimburse would-be operators for both construction expenses and expected profits.¹

The Author Opposes For-Profit institutions

I am not the only one who urges that juvenile justice system services be provided by governmental and non-profit agencies, and that we not contract with for-profit institutions to serve our youth. As one supportive example, the Presbyterian Church USA approved a 2004 resolution that determined earning a profit for shareholders was in fundamental conflict with the concepts of rehabilitation and restorative justice, and that for-profit juvenile and adult institution should be abolished.²

Other religious entities have officially opposed for-profit prisons ... The United Methodist Church ("... greater allegiance to the profit motive than to public safety and to restorative justice for offenders, crime victims, and local communities") and the Southern Catholic Bishops

See NOT FOR PROFIT, next page

IN THIS ISSUE

When Is A Juvenile Not Competent to Stand Trial? States Apply a Wide Variety of Criteria, Processes, and Protocols In Making a Determination	3
Court May Not Require Parents to Submit to Drug Testing as Condition of Juvenile's Probation	5
Attorney General Cannot Reclassify Sex Offenders Already Adjudicated by Court	6
National Report on Sexual Victimization in Juvenile Facilities is Released	8
From the Literature	9
The Case for Juvenile Justice Reform: The Ohio Model	10

youth-serving community-based organizations to work with police departments. SFY is headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Marion Mattingly talked with Lisa Thureau in late June when Thureau was in Baltimore, Maryland, and she shares that discussion about SFY with us.

Marion Mattingly: I have heard about the good work that Strategies for Youth (SFY) does with Police, and think our readers will be very interested in learning about it. What is the purpose of the organization?

Lisa Thureau: SFY is a national organization dedicated to improving police-youth relations. We work to expand police skills and approaches beyond arrest, and to reduce disproportionate minority contact (DMC). Our goal is to make a change in the way police respond to children and youth. This idea grew out of the belief that police would benefit from the latest scientific insights into how the juvenile brain is different and needs to be treated differently.

MM: That seems to me to be critically important. Many other stakeholders in the juvenile justice world receive information and training on juvenile brain development, and police clearly need this information, too.

Change Emphasis From Arrest and Punishment

LT: The vision grows out of the belief that our country's emphasis on arrest and punishment does not serve kids' or communities' needs. We're hoping to redirect the source of the river of kids flowing into those systems by working with police and demonstrating there is a better way.

MM: It seems to me this is more important than ever today when so many public schools have police on campus. What do you think?

LT: We are seeing more police in kid's lives. There are now 17,000 police officers stationed in our nation's public schools. For cultural reasons, and because of losses in social services, police are increasingly the first responders to incidents dealing with kids. But remarkably, American police, who deal with

kids in extremis and distress—abuse and neglect, domestic violence, community violence, mental health crises, juvenile delinquency and victimization—are not trained in child or adolescent development, trauma and its effects on behavior, much less any understanding of the juvenile justice system.

Policing the Teen Brain

MM: How does SFY work with police to reduce arrests?

LT: First, we offer police trainings called "Policing the Teen Brain" in which we use brain science to, as columnist Jerry Large put it, "connect the badge to the brain." We usually base department trainings on an assessment of the quality of officers' interactions with teens. These police trainings focus on giving officers demographic, cultural, and developmental information on teens. We give them very practical strategies for asserting authority effectively without force or arrest. And we focus a lot on implicit bias issues—how officers

See SFY, next page

SFY, from page 14

need to recognize bias in themselves and how to respond to youth who accuse officers of racism.

MM: How do you do this?

LT: All our trainings are team-taught with psychiatrists from the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Department at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH). Since these doctors can't wear guns to deal with extremely upset youth, it demonstrates powerfully that there are verbal psychological tactics that can de-escalate situations without force or cuffs. With Dr. Jeff from MGH, we developed a very visual curriculum, which explains that because youth *perceive* and *process* differently they are going to *respond* differently. We demonstrate this in myriad ways. One of the most exciting things we developed was a series of films in which a "youth" with a mental health issue (actually, MGH's Dr. Mona Patel) interacts with an officer. We ask officers to guess what the name of the mental health issue is and, typically, very few can.

MM: Tell me more about the training sessions. How many members are there on a training team?

LT: The doctors do travel to the police departments we train, and our team varies in size depending on the special issues a department may have that we think we can address. We're hoping to start offering these courses for officers at MGH. Our team always involves "teaching assistants." These are youth who we ask to act like they would normally or like they've seen other youth do in skits. Their job is to explain to the officers in the room why they did or didn't comply with the officer in the skit. That's generally the high point of the training—it all comes together. In the future we're hoping to offer more generalized training courses for officers with MGH in Boston.

Training Results in Fewer Arrests

MM: What kind of impact has the training had within police departments?

LT: Well, our proudest achievement is the reduction of juvenile arrests in one urban police department from 680 in 2001 to 74 in 2009. After working with SFY, this department has become a leader in the field of policing youth and has developed some remarkable innovations.

In other departments we've trained, the arrest rates weren't particularly high to begin with, but the relationship between police and youth had been authoritarian, rather than authoritative, and full of conflict that was unnecessary and harmful. We've also seen our assessments and trainings lead chiefs to reconsider and reorganize how they provide services and change how they use police in the schools.

Training Youth in Juvenile Justice Jeopardy

MM: In addition to your work training police, do you also work directly with youth?

LT: Yes, SFY's second strategy is training youth. Youth have inaccurate conceptions of how police may and should act, and how the police and courts will treat them. Such misconceptions get youth in trouble. We use a game we call "Juvenile Justice Jeopardy" to teach youth strategies for interacting with police and avoiding 'contempt of cop' arrests. We don't focus on rights

the game in Los Angeles, and we are also training juvenile defenders. Funding permitting, we're working on plans to replicate this work in New York City and Chicago next.

SFY Advocates for Raising Standards for Police

MM: Besides training police and youth, I understand SFY is involved in advocacy. Can you tell us more about that?

LT: That's right. Our third strategy is advocacy. We are working with national police organizations to ensure the highest standards and to promote science-based approaches for treatment of youth and for dealing with DMC. We invoke these standards when we challenge certain police practices in court or elsewhere. We're also developing a legislative strategy to promote training at the state level. Believe it or not, only Connecticut requires police be trained in juvenile development and juvenile law.

MM: That's amazing, but good for Connecticut. What are you doing to encourage change in other locations?

"In my experience, when police see the approach actually makes their life easier, they are quite open to it."

because they're too abstract for many kids. Instead, we focus more on scenarios and very concrete behaviors that are likely to get kids arrested and sent into a system that is just plain harmful in too many cases. Our goal is to make explicit for youth how to navigate these interactions. Jeopardy is a fun, interactive way of having a long conversation about what conduct can get you arrested, and how the juvenile justice system works, including its racial biases, and collateral consequences like getting a record that may cause your family to lose their housing.

MM: Do you see other benefits to the game?

LT: The game also gives adults a window into understanding how police are treating kids. Where we train police, we also play Jeopardy to make sure both sides of the relationship are better informed. One of our goals is to replicate the game nationally. Right now, we're replicating

LT: We've had good success behind the scenes in Indiana where legislation was enacted in March creating a working group to develop training for police officers working with youth. Indiana also passed a law that requires data collection for police/youth arrests and interactions in schools. These statutes are the first in the nation. We're trying to build momentum in this direction nationally.

Police Are Receptive to New Approaches

MM: Most people do not think police are open to change. What makes you think SFY can succeed?

LT: In my experience, when police see the approach actually makes their life easier, they are quite open to it. Most police do not like arresting kids. And most police chiefs invariably want

See SFY, next page

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SFY, from page 15

to do things better. They see the same endless cycles of violence we see and want to stop it. I find a lot of them open to new ideas. I also think that the issue is rising to a fevered pitch because

attorneys calling me to say their 6 year old was shackled to a desk, or that 10 year old girls were maced for being disorderly when officers checked a noise complaint. And I'll know we've succeeded when officers click on their tool belt; they will stop when they're dealing with youth and say to themselves, "Ok, this is a kid, I've

We are seeing more police in kids' lives. There are now 17,000 police officers stationed in our nation's public schools.

of the placement of so many officers in public schools, and numerous law suits, so that departments are going to recognize they have to police youth differently.

MM: How will you know if SFY has succeeded?

LT: I'll know we've succeeded when the accepted best practices for police include being trained in how to work with youth effectively and how to connect to youth serving organizations as an alternative to arrest, and when I get fewer parents and

got to put my strategies for youth on" before wading into the fray.

MM: How is SFY funded?

LT: SFY is currently funded by fee for service trainings as well as with the support of individual donors and local foundations.

MM: It is good to know about your work, and it has lived up to its reputation. Thank you so very much.

For more information about Strategies for Youth, go to www.strategiesfor youth.org ■

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