

Baton Rouge, LA – The Advocate **La. among leaders in helping juveniles**

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Louisiana, which a short time ago was accused of running gladiator camps for young offenders, now is among the best states in the nation for setting up programs aimed at helping juveniles who find themselves in trouble with the law, according to a national survey.

Many states announce reform programs and start them, but the services are not widely used by the families and juveniles, usually as an alternative to being incarcerated, said Peter Greenwood, of Agoura, Calif., who conducted the study.

“You’re doing a great job down here,” Greenwood, executive director at Advancing Evidence Based Practice, told officials, who run some of the programs, at a Louisiana Models for Change event. “What are the lessons? What does Louisiana do? We have to teach that to other places.”

Greenwood’s research project collected demographic and juvenile justice processing data from all 50 states, assessing the extent to which each state is using evidence-based programs, and identifying those characteristics or practices that either impede or support the adoption of such programs.

Louisiana began making changes to its system in 2006. Since then, according to the study, Louisiana has become one of four states that showed a high percentage of the affected population using the services. The study identified the common steps that the four states — Louisiana, Maine, Connecticut and New Mexico — have in common to help other states implement the programs, he said.

“This is the only way we know how to attack incarceration,” Greenwood said.

Advancing Evidence Based Practice’s members are public and private organizations that treat at-risk youths. Greenwood refused to say which foundation paid for the national study.

Greenwood said the federal lawsuits that constitutionally challenged the way Louisiana handled juvenile offenders focused attention on the need to change the system at the highest levels of government.

The result was that Louisiana involved all the people who had a stake in the process, from the families of the offenders to the prosecutors to the personnel hired to treat them.

In 1998, a federal lawsuit was filed alleging that the conditions and services in Louisiana’s secure-care facilities did not meet constitutional standards.

The U.S. Department of Justice and the state entered into settlement agreements to improve educational, medical and mental health services, and conditions of confinement.

In 2003, the state set up the Juvenile Justice Reform Act Implementation Commission to study and assess the system and make recommendations for change.

By 2006, one facility was closed, the others were in compliance with the settlement agreements, and the lawsuit was dismissed.