

PARENTING PLUS – March 2010

BY ANDREW MALEKOFF, amalekoff@northshorechildguidance.org

Executive Director of the North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center

If your child is not healthy, my child is not safe

Gladys Carrión, Commissioner of the New York State Office of Children & Family Services, oversees 26 juvenile detention facilities that hold close to 2,000 kids under 16 who have committed criminal acts. In a 2008 interview with *New York Daily News*, she stated that over 80% of the adolescents in this system have serious mental health problems that go untreated. Carrión described the network of juvenile facilities as a “pipeline to prison.” The system damages children and families and fails to make our neighborhoods safer.

Sara Montalbano, a social worker at North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center, who specializes in mental health counseling for delinquents and juvenile offenders and their families, has worked with a wide range of adolescents. “On one end of the spectrum,” she explains, “there are kids who were arrested for punching a hole in the wall at home. On the other end, there are kids who set fires and committed assaults and murders.” Montalbano asserted that, “There are not adequate resources to help these children and families on either end of the continuum.”

In an exposé written by *New York* magazine (February 10, 2010), it was reported that a US Department of Justice investigation found that employees in several New York State juvenile detention facilities were “restraining kids so often and with so much force that kids had endured concussions, broken teeth and broken bones.”

Since her appointment in 2007, Commissioner Carrión has closed 9 juvenile residential facilities. This has been replaced, in part, with alternatives-to-prison prevention programs that include psychiatric support and family therapy. However, historically elected officials have hesitated to support “pay now or pay later” prevention programs.

“The fundamental problem with elected officials,” according to Lee Staples, clinical professor at the University of Boston School of Social Work, “is that they almost always choose to ‘pay later’ because when the bill comes due, they frequently are no longer in the same office. They are resistant to ‘paying now’ for fear of losing the immediate votes of angry taxpayers.” This is a structural problem that works against almost all preventive programs. Add in “the paradox of prevention,” whereby the general public no longer sees a pressing problem when social programs are successful, and those same programs suddenly are at risk.

According to Dr. Staples, “We saw the phenomenon clearly in the city of Boston when gang violence spiked more than a decade ago. Some very effective preventive programs were put in place, violent crime statistics dropped dramatically, the programs were cut and the statistics almost immediately shot back up. It is not so much that politicians cannot learn that prevention really saves money but, rather, they see an imperative to act based on short-term electoral self-interest and immediate budgetary constraints – which, of course, is always present in an underdeveloped social welfare system.”

Closer to home, in 2009, then Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi threatened to shut down 43 community-based youth services that served over 60,000 children and families across Nassau County, to help close a reported \$130-million dollar county budget deficit. The impact of eliminating critical prevention services would have resulted in a greater cost to taxpayers - \$200,000 per year to lock-up a juvenile in a state residential facility. And, the return on the investment is poor, as almost 90% of those locked up in these settings engage in ongoing criminal activity.

The citizens that fought back to preserve youth services in Nassau County were operating at a higher moral standard than those who were counting votes. Morality aside, though, advocates for youth services have a visceral understanding about the real consequences of not supporting prevention. They are not, as the old insult goes, “bleeding hearts.” If a person supports prevention it does not mean that they excuse criminal behavior.

It does not take a bleeding heart, only a rationale mind, to know that if your child is not healthy, my child is not safe.