

Delancey Street takes charge of juvenile justice system overhaul

Three pilot projects will get underway in the Mission by the beginning of 1998

By Carolyn Abate

Shots ring out on a street corner, as a car speeds off into the night. A young man lays unnaturally still on the sidewalk while he bleeds to death. This scenario, or one very similar, has become all too common in communities throughout the City and the nation. In the last five years, gang violence has claimed the lives of 56 people in our neighborhood, alone. Beginning the first of the year, the City's overwhelmed and antiquated juvenile justice system will be re-energized by a three part youth violence prevention program based in the Mission, and directed by the Delancey Street Foundation.

When the Delancey Street Foundation was asked to conduct a study for the San Francisco Juvenile Justice System, the first thing the nonprofit looked at was youths already in Juvenile Hall. With the help of police and community agencies, Delancey Street took a "snapshot" of 164 youths who passed through Juvenile Hall on a given day. Craig Miller, of the Delancey Implementation Team, says that "one kid, his parents had committed suicide when he was eleven, and all his problems started exhibiting after that." Miller recalls that most of youth involved in the assessment had some similar points in their lives. But what upset Miller and his colleagues the most was no record of anyone intervening.

That phenomenon set the tone for discussions, talks that included the youth offenders, themselves. Gerald Miller, a resident of Delancey Street who worked on the interviews explains. "A lot of studies have been written (about kids) but nobody ever asked them what they thought. We had a chance to go in and ask them: what do you think is wrong with the system, what do you feel you need in you life to make things go better?"

What has developed is a comprehensive action plan for the City's juvenile justice system, designed to address not only the stalemate found in the traditional criminal justice system, but also to provide intervention and alternatives in the lives of youthful offenders. The plan is funded by a \$5.4 million grant, awarded by the California Board of Correction, and will start with six new programs, to be implemented over the next three years. Under Delancey Street's guidance, three pilot programs that emphasize community involvement through personal accountability and character development, Safe Corridor, Community Assessment and Early Risk-Resilience, are headed for the Mission by January 1998.

Safe Corridors

The first pilot program, Safe Corridor, is based on Mission Street and focuses on the crime spots along this route. According to the San Francisco Police Department, the Mission District's juvenile crime rate is forty percent higher than other parts of the City, with peak hours from two to five in the afternoon, when school is out. Among other things, Safe Corridor is bringing police, merchants and community groups already involved into one coordinated approach. C. Miller says this could include encouraging merchants to hire more teens or having community groups improve after-school programs. An increase in police foot patrols on Mission Street is also expected, but with an emphasis on community policing.

One part of Safe Corridor will center around youths on probation for serious crimes. "There are about thirty kids on probation who meet that [criteria]," Craig Miller explains. "Police and probation will jointly supervise visits to their homes in the evening, checking on school. Really making sure they adhering to the conditions of their probation, which is attending school, no drugs or alcohol and curfew." Miller says this aspect of the Safe Corridor program also involves a community case-worker that will provide support to the family.

Community Assessment

The Community Assessment Center is the second pilot program. Craig Miller calls it a place that will link a youth offender to an intervention program, "not a detention center. It will be a place where kids go that will be staffed by health and community workers. There, they will receive a comprehensive assessment. Beyond that, those kids will receive a case-worker, which will then make sure the kid gets help. That doesn't happen right now."

In addition, he says, "We'll find out what's going on with the family; we'll find out what's going with school." If the problem is family issues, then the center will get the family down to the facility. "We want to make it the kind of place where kids know they are going to get some help." Craig Miller says youths that are arrested will still have to go through the court system and youths that commit serious crimes will have to go to Juvenile Hall. Although the assessment center will be located at the Tenderloin YMCA, the first youth offenders to be sent there will be from the Mission.

Risk Resilience

Early Risk Resilience, the third and final portion of the plan is probably the most complex pilot project. The program has the difficult and delicate task of taking youth that have certain characteristics in their lives that could lead them towards crime, and steer those children to a more productive path. Delancy Street is basing this program on a theory that defines critical risk factors, such as heavy drug use, truancy and a parent with a history of crime, identifying a child for quick intervention.

According to the report, 99 percent of the kids profiled from Juvenile Hall did not attend school and more than fifty percent had families involved with crime.

Miller describes their goal this way: "What we hope is to develop a system where [we know when] a kid has five or six or seven of these things, multiple risk factors. So if a kid has parent who goes to prison, and they are truant, and the teacher notices they aren't paying attention, and maybe the police have gone to the home — several things — those are the kids we want to pull into this system. A school knows when a kid is truant and probation knows when an adult goes to state prison. So part of that project is really, to link that information into a place to access it, and say if a kid has these five things, then they need early intervention."

More importantly, the "resilience" program is designed to establish opportunities for kids. It seeks to identify an area of interest, in music, art or science, for example, and then connect the child to an art program or a mentor or teacher that can help the youth explore his or her interests. Finding mentors for youths offenders is crucial for the programs to succeed.

Gerald Miller says the best mentors are those who have had similar experiences. "I spent 13 years in prison, a drug addict, dope fiend, [who] ran around the Mission for years and years terrorizing people. I know what it feels like to be crazy and out there. But I know if you catch a kid or someone at the right time, they don't have to go through what I did. I also know you have to teach people things, in order to make their life different."

Craig Miller says that right now, the foundation is trying to establish a network among those groups involved, which range from those based in the community to churches and the police. He says the next three years will be a test for future Juvenile Justice System plans.

Until then, Delancy Street's primary concern is getting these programs off the ground, so that a real difference can be made in a child's life. "We want to develop an assessment that looks at strengths... [and] builds on these strengths, one that connects children and families to services, and that can protect them from all the things that are bad in their lives."