Alternatives to Youth Detention: Success Highlighted in Ohio

Research shows community-based alternatives to detention for nonviolent juvenile offenders can result in better outcomes. (Pixabay).

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COLUMBUS, Ohio – Putting children who get into trouble on the right path can be challenging, and a newer approach to the problem is seeing great success in Ohio.

This week, juvenile justice, child welfare, and public safety leaders are at the inaugural Ohio Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative Conference in Columbus.

The initiative focuses on evidence-backed practices that can help safely reduce the number of youth in detention.

State JDAI Administrator Regina Lurry says the initiative started in five Ohio counties eight years ago and now there are 10 involved.

"In Ohio, we are making some great strides," she states. "We've reduced the number of commitments to the Department of Youth Services by 70 percent.

"And not only are less kids going in detention, their average length of stay is also being decreased by 26 percent."

Lurry says even short stays in detention can have a negative impact on a youth's mental and physical health, academic success and financial outcomes as an adult.

The JDAI model encourages better collaboration among systems involved in the juvenile justice process, as well as data-driven placement decisions and the use of community based detention alternatives for nonviolent juvenile offenders.

Jurisdictions involved in JDAI evaluate their internal systems, as well as the reasons youths are sent to detention and any underlying issues in the youth's life.

Lurry explains that some Ohio counties discovered many children being sent to detention based upon domestic violence cases.

"They created alternatives so that they are addressing those family conflict issues and those kids no longer have to come to detention," she states.

"They still may be removed for a short period of time, kind of a cooling off period. But they've recognized that detention wasn't necessarily the best place for those kids."

JDAI was launched in the 1990s by The Annie E. Casey Foundation and has 300 sites nationally.

In Ohio, Cuyahoga, Franklin, Lucas, Marion, Mahoning, Montgomery, Summit and Trumbull counties are involved, and the initiative recently expanded into Ashtabula and Warren counties.

Lurry is hopeful for even more expansion.

"The conference gives non-JDAI sites an opportunity to learn about not only the national best practices but some of the innovative things that the JDAI sites are doing within their own home state that they can learn from," she points out.

Nationally, participating JDAI sites report improvements in average daily detention population and public safety outcomes.

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