



Struggle to help teen girls in trouble

State working to stem rising DYS population

By JENNIFER FENN, Sun Statehouse Bureau
April 16, 2005

Randilee Pearl grew up on the streets of Fitchburg, where her days and nights were spent "chillin'" on the block with her boys smoking dope.

But after her first run-in with police at age 11 -- assault and battery and drug possession -- Pearl spent the next seven years running from the cops and in and out of juvenile detention facilities, including nearly a year at the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps Fay A. Rotenberg School in Chelmsford.

She was locked up for the first time when she was 12 after failing a drug test while on probation.

"I was raised on North Street and I was around drugs all the time, and I just fell into it," said Pearl, now 18. "It was a rush to run from the police and have them looking for me. I'd think, 'Damn, I've been out six months, and they haven't found me yet. Now that's good.'"

She and her friends formed a gang they called the Mulatto Mafia. She bullied other kids, did drugs and had no interest in school.

But after seven years of running -- and one suicide attempt -- Pearl got tired. And she got scared. She went back to juvenile lockup last summer after her mother's apartment was raided and the police found drugs. As she approached her 18th birthday, she suddenly realized the security she had in lockup would be gone. If she got arrested as an adult, she'd go to jail.

"Within that time, the people who were supposed to be holding me down turned their backs on me," she said. "I came out to nothing. I thought, 'Damn,

I'm 18. I'm by myself and I have to do something.'"

"I saw what was going on with my boys. They keep getting shot up. I was scared, and I didn't want to chill on the block no more. I realized there were bigger and better things out there than the street life and jail."

So Pearl decided to put her life together.

Female population growing

Pearl is just one of a growing number of girls committed to the state's Department of Youth Services lockup facilities each year.

During the past decade, the female population has grown from 169 to 453, a 168 percent increase. From March 1, 2004, to March 1, 2005, the female population went down by 4 percent, thanks to a significant drop in the Boston area. However, the population continued to rise in the other three regions of the state, including the western and central areas.

Officials aren't exactly sure why the numbers are rising, but it's a national trend, said Edward Dolan, the acting

commissioner of DYS. One theory is that women's roles have changed, Dolan said. Girls are no longer expected to "act like a lady." They're more active and involved in all facets of life. When they get angry, they no longer lash out in so-called catfights, but in more significant assaults.

DYS has responded by making major changes to better serve the girls in custody, Dolan said. More female staff members were hired, current staff members were retrained, and new services were added to cater to the girls' needs. The department plans to build a brand-new, secure residential facility for girls, and it hired a director of female services to oversee all those changes.

"There is a ton of research that shows girls are different when it comes to the kind of background and factors that bring them into the system," Dolan said. "And their development is different. So in order to be more efficient in providing services, the system needed to change."

Kids enter the system after they've been arrested. DYS serves as a holding site until trial and as a placement facility if a judge commits the youth to the system. Most of the girls in the system have been charged with low-level crimes, such as assault and battery or larceny, Dolan said. Few are violent and many, like Pearl, are repeat offenders.

"We're not in the business of punishing kids," Dolan said. "We're in the business of helping kids develop into positive, good functioning adults. They've done some bad things, but what we're trying to do is pay attention to adolescent development and provide them with the kinds of supports and socialization and education and training that kids on the outside get through school, family and positive interaction with adults.

"Our kids, for whatever reason, didn't get that," he added. "They don't get the guidance. They don't have a good sense of themselves. They don't feel like a positive part of anything. They don't feel like they have a future."

'I know they helped me'

Pearl, who was raised by a single mother, credits the DYS system -- specifically her stint at the Rotenberg School on Princeton Street in Chelmsford near the Lowell line -- for helping her turn her life around. No matter how many times she was in and out of the system, she said they never gave up on her. Before she was released, DYS helped her find housing, a job, counseling and health care.

She spends more time at the DYS office today than she did while she was in the system. Pearl recently completed classes at an alternative evening school offered by Fitchburg High School and will receive a diploma. For class, she had to write an essay describing a place of importance to her. Pearl wrote about DYS.

"DYS is there to help each and every one of us," she said. "I know they helped me."

While the state has responded by making major changes to better serve the female juveniles in custody, law-enforcement officials and advocates say more must be done to help keep girls before they reach that point.

Many of the girls have problems that can't be solved by lockup alone, said Mary Harte, program director of the Rotenberg School, the state's only secure, long-term treatment facility for girls.

"We're seeing an increase in demand for services for females in general," Harte said. "They don't always have to take place in a locked setting. There are plenty of programs for boys, but girls are unique."

She said girls in general come in with a disadvantage because they tend to be more sensitive and do a lot of questioning about self-esteem and body image. She said they also are more prone to turn their anger inward and engage in self-injurious behavior.

Harte said there is a need for more mental-health programs because many of the girls come into the system with bipolar or eating disorders, for example.

"There aren't the kind of community supports we'd like to see for girls to prevent them from getting into the system," said Francine Sherman, director of the Juvenile Rights Advocacy Project at Boston College Law School. "Programs and resources from a prevention point of view is in its infancy."

Social-service programs have faced deep cuts in recent years after the economy tanked in 2001. While it has been difficult to maintain existing services, Sherman said it's nearly impossible to create new ones for girls.

Sherman said more broad-range, positive, community-based programs are needed that are gender- and cultural-appropriate and incorporate families.

Many kids end up in the system because they've been abused, have mental-health issues, or other problems at home, she said. By addressing those needs better, more kids can be kept out of the juvenile justice system.

'Our hands are tied'

Middlesex District Attorney Martha Coakley would welcome more community programs. She said prosecutors would be willing to direct girls to substance-abuse or mental-health programs, but in their absence they have no choice but to send them to the juvenile system.

The state, for example, has only one residential substance-abuse facility for juveniles, and it's on the Cape, she said.

"Our hands are somewhat tied," Coakley said. "We might like to divert them, but we don't have any place to send them. What we've tried to do is raise awareness, but it's expensive, and people are cutting those programs."

Pearl would also like to see more programs specifically for girls. And she'd also like to be part of the solution as she turns her life around.

Pearl now has a steady boyfriend who wasn't part of the clique she hung around with in her younger days. She's living with her mother in Leominster and plans to take classes to become a certified nursing assistant. In the fall, she wants to enroll at Fitchburg State College and major in criminal justice so she can work with kids like herself and, hopefully, make a difference.

"Don't get me wrong," she said. "It's not all peaches and cream. I still struggle every day. But we're trying to take it day by day."