CHALLENGE #6:

OFFER QUALITY TREATMENT AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SERVICES FOR INCARCERATED YOUTH

"The majority of delinquents, even those who have committed serious crimes, will be released back into their communities [while they are still] in their teens and twenties.... Without an education, without health care, without practical skills, without transition steps back into their communities, without programs that have turned their antisocial activity into meaningful life lessons, what chance do they have of becoming productive, law abiding citizens? What chance does our society have of being safe?"[38]

Coalition for Juvenile Justice

Every day in America, about 105,000 young people are held in custody. They include 27,600 awaiting trial or pending placement, and 76,500 who have been found delinquent and committed to correctional facilities. Most of the youth offenders committed to a residential placement are housed in state-funded "training schools" – large, congregate care facilities that often mirror adult prisons both in physical environment and correctional philosophy.

Nationwide, only one-fourth of young people confined in training schools have been convicted of (or "adjudicated" for) violent felonies, and many have committed only status offenses, drug possession, disorderly conduct, or other less serious crimes. Thus, many or most could be safely and more effectively sanctioned in community-based correctional programs. Indeed, the success of Missouri's Division of Youth Services (see Challenge #1) proves that many youth now committed to state care could be safely supervised in the community – and that community-based correctional programs can produce recidivism rates far below those typically achieved by training schools.

However, in Missouri and every other state, there remain youthful offenders who have committed crimes so heinous or suffer behavioral problems so severe and potentially dangerous that secure (i.e., locked) residential placement is the only safe option. Simply locking up these youth does not guarantee public safety, however. Because most youth will return to the community within 12-18 months (and almost all will return by their early twenties), the quality of the corrections program is critically important.

Unfortunately, the quality of juvenile corrections facilities nationwide is highly uneven. Several problems are commonplace:

- **Substandard conditions of confinement.** In 1993, the U.S. Justice Department released a comprehensive study finding that 62 percent of confined youth were held in overcrowded facilities, which suffer higher rates of violence against both staff and other youth than non-crowded facilities.[39] Also, physical abuse by juvenile corrections staff has been documented in several states. Overall, 37 successful lawsuits have been filed on behalf of juvenile offenders in 25 states in the past three decades regarding both overcrowding and abuse issues, and the problems show no sign of abating.[40]

- **Inadequate programming.** Though required to provide educational services to all youth 16 and younger, many training schools offer educational activities for only a few hours per day. These educational activities often lack academic rigor, and they seldom include quality special education services for youth with learning disabilities (as required by law). Inadequate mental health screening and treatment are also pervasive in juvenile

corrections facilities, despite the high rates of mental, emotional and substance abuse problems plaguing juvenile inmate populations.

- **Undertrained staff.** Day-to-day supervision of juvenile offenders in most training schools is provided by low-paid workers without college education or in-depth training in youth development. Thus, even if quality education and counseling services are provided for a few hours each day, confined youth spend the bulk of their waking hours overseen by staff without the skills or motivation to maintain a positive, therapeutic environment.

- **Inadequate aftercare.** Perhaps the most self-defeating weakness in juvenile justice today is the lack of support and supervision for youth returning home from juvenile correctional institutions. By definition, these are the most dangerous and high-risk of all youth. Yet in most states and communities these young people are provided only modest supervision as they re-enter the community and few services to help them achieve success and remain crime-free.

"Research shows that subjecting youth to such harsh confinement conditions increases rates of violence and recidivism," concluded the American Bar Association in 1998. "In a society that already faces daily violence and crime, deficiencies in the care of incarcerated youth serve only to further threaten the well-being of our children, families, and communities."[41]

THE LAST CHANCE RANCH
TURNING AROUND FLORIDA'S TOUGHEST JUVENILE OFFENDERS

For more than twenty years, Florida's juvenile courts have been sending some of their most difficult and dangerous cases to a unique program in the Everglades, the Florida Environmental Institute. So too have Florida's criminal court judges, giving hard case adolescents a final opportunity in the juvenile justice system before sentencing them to adult prison.

Here's why: unlike virtually every other juvenile corrections facility in the nation, Florida Environmental Institute has a long track record of effectively rehabilitating serious and violent juvenile offenders. "This is a demonstration project that shows that when you look at sending these kinds of kids to prison, it doesn't make sense," says Frank Orlando, for 21 years a judge in Broward County, Florida and now Director of the Center for the Study of Youth Policy at Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale. "We're talking about kids, most of whom have a much more serious background than the majority of kids being transferred to adult courts today. But the recidivism rates are very low. Public safety is enhanced."[42]

UP FROM THE SEA: THE EVOLUTION OF A JUVENILE JUSTICE MODEL

The roots of the Florida Environmental Institute date back to 1969, when Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton launched a new oceanographic research institute. That same year, the Institute's director accepted several troubled boys to work on the Institute's research projects. Quickly, institute leaders saw that the marine research activities had a powerfully positive effect on participating youth. Over time, they devoted more and more of the Institute's efforts to redirecting the lives of troubled youth, rather than research.

The initial program for juvenile offenders in Boca Raton was replicated in Tampa and St. Petersburg in 1972, then in three more sites by 1974. Each program was (and still is) run by an autonomous, non-profit corporation with a local board of directors. However, an umbrella organization, Associated Marine Institutes (AMI), was created in 1974 to provide the local programs with management and administrative support.

"We have no lock-up room at FEI and we don't teach our staff to 'take kids down' by wrestling them to the ground and pinning them. We are convinced that the more unusual you treat a kid, the more unusual he will act."

AMI President, Robert Weaver.

Today, the AMI network includes 51 institutes in seven states and the Cayman Islands. Thirty of these are non-residential day programs, like the initial marine project in Boca Raton. The remaining 21 are residential juvenile corrections centers, including seven in Florida. Among them, the oldest and most successful is Florida Environmental Institute.

A RANCH FOR FLORIDA'S TOUGHEST JUVENILES

Located at Fish Eating Creek in the township of Venus, 40 miles northwest of Lake Okeechobee, the Florida Environmental Institute (FEI) is surrounded by miles of open, humid, alligator-and mosquito-infested swamp and forest. When delinquent youths first started arriving in 1982, they slept in tents. There was no choice: no buildings yet stood on the 40-acre site. Since then, participants and staff have erected several structures – including two dormitories, general education and vocational classrooms, a tool shed, a barn, and a dining hall. They have also turned the property into a working ranch, raising cattle and pigs, tending horses, and growing corn, peas, cucumbers, and other crops.

FEI earned its "Last Chance Ranch" nickname in the 1980s, soon after opening. The label was coined by the participants themselves, all of whom were sent to FEI on serious felony charges. Though all were 17 or younger when committing their offenses, many of the youth had been transferred to adult criminal courts. Local judges sent them to the FEI juvenile program as a final opportunity – a last chance – before a sentence to adult prison. A study in the 1980s reported that FEI youths had been charged with an average of 18 delinquent offenses each, including 11.5 felonies. In 1997-98, the average youth released from FEI had accumulated a remarkable 32.7 charges, including 11.8 felony charges, the highest felony rate among the 35 Florida programs serving serious juvenile offenders and the second highest rate of total offenses.[43]

A UNIQUE ATMOSPHERE

Despite the serious profile of juvenile offenders sent to FEI, the facility has never used iron bars, handcuffs, or locked cells. The nearest state road is 15 miles away – and the nearest town is another 20 miles beyond that. Thus, despite the lack of correctional hardware, escape is virtually impossible. (FEI's most recent escape attempt came in 1998, unlike Florida's "secure" juvenile corrections facilities which suffer several escapes every year.) The lack of bars and physical restraints has long been a core element of the Associated Marine Institute philosophy – and it provided the rationale for AMI's decision to locate the facility in the remote Everglades.

According to Frank Orlando, who helped found the initial program in Boca Raton and still sits on AMI's board of trustees, "If the program was in the community, it would have to be hardware secure. This way, the kids don't get the feeling that they are being caged like animals."

"We have no lock-up room at FEI and we don't teach our staff to 'take kids down' by wrestling them to the ground and pinning them," explains AMI President Robert Weaver. "We are convinced that the more unusual you treat a kid, the more unusual he will act."[44]

Orlando also points to FEI's unusually small population as a key to its success. The ranch has capacity only for 22 participants at a time, compared with the 100-400 youth capacity of Florida's prison-like "youth development centers." According to Orlando, "The small population at Last Chance Ranch gives the program the opportunity to carry out its mission, which is to address the kids' problems and change their behavior."

REWARDS, PUNISHMENTS, AND HARD WORK

When a young man is referred to the Ranch, his ride to the program ends on the side of the road two miles from the main facility. He is met there by the program's director and another counselor. Freed from handcuffs, leg irons, and any other restraints, he then hikes through the swamp and palmetto forest as staff begin explaining to him the programs rules, philosophy and expectations. The hike ends at "O Camp," just outside the main FEI campus, where the offender will talk with staff and senior participants and begin the physical work (grass cutting, weeding, etc.) that will be a steady part of his days at FEI. At O Camp, new participants must agree to abide by the many rules that govern life at the Ranch, and they begin to bond with staff and peers. If all goes well in O Camp, the new participant will join the rest of the FEI population for the evening meal on the third day. If the participants resists or acts out, the process may extend one or two additional days.

Phase One. Upon entering the main FEI campus, participants begin the first of the three stages in the FEI rehabilitation process. In Phase One, which lasts six months or longer, youth sleep in an austere dorm with a hard floor, bunk beds, plywood walls, screened windows without glass, and no television or other amenities. Despite the steamy climate, the Phase One dorm has no air conditioning, although ceiling fans are provided to circulate the hot air.

The participants' days are consumed with two kinds of work: 1) individualized academic education, where they make progress toward a high school diploma or GED; and 2) physical labor tending farm animals, caring for crops, digging up tree stumps to clear land, cleaning and maintaining ranch facilities, making repairs and improvements to the ranch buildings (and sometimes building new ones), and more.

"The small population at Last Chance Ranch gives the program the opportunity to carry out its mission, which is to address the kids' problems and change their behavior."

However, youths' primary task at FEI is to earn credit toward going home. FEI, like all of the Associated Marine Institute programs, is operated on a strict behavior management regimen. Participants are ranked five times per day on seven areas of behavior: being on time, appearance, attitude, leadership, participation, enthusiasm, and manners. In the short-term, these rankings determine the order in which participants are seated in the cafeteria, and who is first to receive a second portion. The primary importance of the weekly rankings, however, is long-term: FEI youth are released from the program only after they have earned enough "point cards" to progress through all of the required levels. Each participant earns between half and one-and-a-half point cards per week, and each must earn 12 cards to complete each of FEI's six levels. While fighting, rule breaking and disobeying instructions do not land young people in physical restraints or solitary confinement, as in a typical youth corrections facility, they do set back the youth's progress toward going home, and often lead to an extra helping of tough physical chores.

"Their behavior and their attitude determines their whole length of stay," says FEI director, Mike Shumans. "If they're not doing well and they don't earn the point cards they need to progress, then they can be here a long time. If they follow the rules and do well, they can get out in a year. It's basically up to them."

Phase Two. In Phase One, participants must progress from the "Tenderfoot" level to the "Ranch Hand" level and finally to the "Buckaroo" level. Once they complete this third level, youth shift into Phase Two, which begins with a move into a more comfortable, air-conditioned dormitory with a television, more comfortable furnishings, and bit of private space. Participants continue their academic and ranch work during this phase, and they also take part in occasional community service and environmental projects. Toward the end of Phase Two, which also lasts six months or longer,

students earn the right to go back to their home towns with an FEI staff member and begin finding work, rebuilding family relationships, and making living arrangements (if there is no safe and healthy family home).

PHASE THREE – MAKING AFTERCARE A CENTERPIECE

Unlike many juvenile corrections programs, where the treatment largely stops when youth leave the facility, the FEI program has always included a heavy focus on the transition home. During the month prior to leaving the ranch, youth work closely with their counselors to develop plans for their return. Once home, youth receive five visits per week from an FEI community coordinator, plus frequent calls from the case manager on staff at the FEI campus.

Community coordinators monitor the progress of the young people – and can even return youth to the ranch if their behavior lapses. As at the ranch, however, the emphasis is more on supporting youth

The New Ferris School
Juvenile Corrections Reform in Delaware

Back in the early 1990s, Delaware's Ferris training school was a terrible place. Designed to house 47 youthful offenders, the facility typically held 80 or 90 – even 100. "The conditions were atrocious," said Judith Mellen, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union for Delaware. "The physical plant was not only in very poor repair, it was almost impossible to keep clean. Food was not adequate. Clothing was not adequate. Education was not adequate."[45]

The ACLU filed suit in 1990 to protest conditions at Ferris, but nobody in state government listened until Governor Thomas Carper was elected and settled the suit in 1993. Under a consent decree, Delaware razed the old Ferris School and spent $14 million to build a new 69,000 square-foot facility. Moreover, it adopted a new correctional philosophy. Today, all youth in Ferris School receive drug and alcohol education, anger management, conflict resolution, sex education and HIV prevention. As part of that new approach, all direct care workers at Ferris must now have a bachelor's degree in education or a behavioral science.

Perhaps the most impressive advance at the "New Ferris" has been the education program. Thanks to a unique partnership with the DuPont Company, almost every youth in the facility now has a mentor. DuPont provides financial support for the program and 78 volunteers – DuPont executives, chemists, engineers, and researchers — who meet weekly with youth and help them with their academic work. Since the new Ferris School opened in 1997 and the mentoring program began, students have averaged a remarkable increase of 2.5 grade levels during their six-nine month stays at Ferris.

"It may not be common practice for the American Civil Liberty Union to publicly laud state officials who have faced them in court and over the negotiating table," wrote Delaware ACLU Director, Judith Mellen in February 2000, "but Ferris' transformation is an uncommonly successful result of the initiative of state officials and the ACLU. The Delaware experience should serve as a model, not only for Ferris, but also for the cooperative process that went into achieving this result."[46]

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than threatening them. Coordinators get actively involved in helping youth to gain admission to schools or colleges or employment, assisting youths' families to secure needed services or benefits, and advocating for youth with schools or employers. The intensive support continues for six months before the youth finally graduates from the FEI program.

UNPARALLELED RESULTS

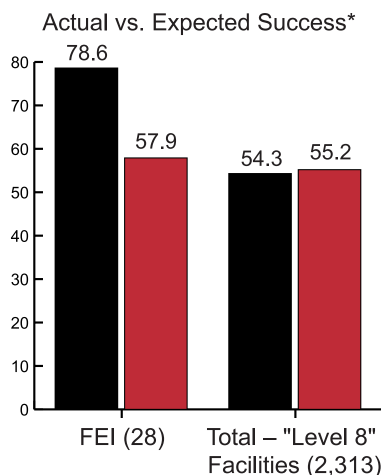
Each year, the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice evaluates each of the more-than-100 juvenile corrections programs operating statewide. The Department calculates the success rates and costs per successful completion for each program, and it measures each program's success against an "expected success rate" that is based upon the specific demographic and offending profile of youths assigned to the program.

For the four-year period from 1997 through 2000, only nine of 57 (15.8 percent) serious juvenile offenders released from FEI were found guilty of a new offense in their first 12 months after completing the program. This compares to an average reconviction rate of more than 40 percent for all Florida institutions serving serious juvenile offenders. In 2000, only one FEI graduate out of 21 – just 4.6 percent – was found by a court to have committed a new offense.

The average cost for one youth to complete a term at FEI, $75,000, runs well above the rates ($30,000 - $50,000) in Florida's four prison-like juvenile corrections facilities for serious offenders. However, despite this disparity – which is due to FEI's high staff-to-participant ratio and the longer than average periods of confinement at FEI – the program also scores well in terms of cost-effectiveness. For the two-year period from July 1996 through June 1998 (in which FEI experienced a 21.6 percent reconviction rate), the program's average cost per successful completion ($58,120) was higher than two of Florida's four "youth centers" and lower than two others.

However, this figure does not include the costs of continued crime committed by youth after leaving these training schools. According to an analysis published by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice in September 2000, each time a juvenile offender reoffends following release from a commitment program, it costs the state $165,571 in criminal justice and victim costs.[47] Each of the larger programs suffers reconviction rates of 45-55 percent – more than twice the FEI rate. Had Last Chance Ranch graduates reoffended at the rates of the larger Florida

FLORIDA ENVIRONMENTAL INSTITUTE VS. OTHER "LEVEL 8" JUVENILE CORRECTIONS FACILITIES IN FLORIDA:



* Data for juvenile offenders released from correctional facilities during fiscal years 1996-97 and 1997-98.

** Success is defined as no offenses within one year of release.

*** Expected success rates are calculated by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice based on characteristics of juvenile offenders placed into each facility.

Source: *Program Accountability Measures for DJJ Commitment Programs: A Two-Year Analysis, FY 1999-2000*, Management Report # 2000-9 (Tallahassee, FL: Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, March 2000), p. 12.

■ Actual Success Rate**
■ Expected Success Rate***

programs, at least 20 additional offenses would have been committed – at a sum cost of more than $3 million to victims and taxpayers. Clearly, FEI is not only more effective than traditional incarceration programs; it is also more cost-effective. Less cost, more safety.

Operating Agency	Associated Marine Institutes
Program Type	Privately-Run Residential Corrections Facility
Program Goals	Rehabilitation of Serious and Chronic Juvenile Offenders
Target Group	Serious and chronic juvenile offenders, including many who have been transferred to adult courts
Key Strategies	Remote location in the Florida Everglades; small scale (22 youth); no locked cells or restraints; high staff-to-offender ratio; intensive behavior management; extensive aftercare support
Primary Funding Source(s)	Florida Department of Juvenile Justice
Evidence of Effectiveness	20 year-record of extremely low recidivism; strong cost-effectiveness despite high cost-per-participant
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