

Raising The Age in Michigan

Spotlight on Juvenile Justice Alternatives

Since the '90s, Michigan has funneled thousands of youth under 18 into adult corrections following passage of harsh laws aimed to get tough on juvenile offenders. Today, it is one of only four states - along with Georgia, Texas and Wisconsin – that still allows 17-year-olds to be charged as adults instead of adjudicating them in the juvenile justice system.

As the Michigan Legislature prepares to end the 2018 legislature year, the waning days of lame duck provide a final opportunity to reverse the antiquated practice of automatic incarceration in adult prisons of 17-year-old offenders by passing a series of bills reforming the practice. Policy advocates including Michigan's Children believe adjudicating 17 year olds in more age-appropriate programs

designed to give them the supports they need to move on a path of success is a better alternative to adult prisons for these youth's success. In that hope, Michigan's Children invited two youths in Ingham County's Juvenile Justice System housed at Ingham Academy to address what's given them a second chance at a better future. Both young people's lives also included the foster care system, illustrating the need to carefully assess the individual circumstances of youth and their families: something much more likely to happen in the juvenile justice system and more of a challenge when similar youth are charged and sentenced as adults.



Marissa's Story: Marissa, 16, entered the juvenile justice system in Ingham County two years ago when her truancy led to a judge's order to attend Ingham Academy, an alternative school where she could earn a high school diploma and get counseling, behavioral support, and academic and jobs skills training that could help her. "I was acting out in school - cussing at the teachers, not staying in class, arguing with other kids. I wanted to graduate but my whole mindset was different. I was hanging around with kids, thinking if I do what they do, I'll fit in. I felt like I didn't have anybody to talk to."

Marissa had spent much of her life in and out of foster care due to her parents' substance abuse. Severe allergies also left her hospitalized for much of her schooling in fifth and sixth grades. "It was really hard not going to school and really hard when I went back and didn't know what I needed to do."

At 14, she discovered she was pregnant. "I cried for hours and thought, how am I going to do this? I decided I need to do better so I don't get locked up because if I do, who's going to take care of my daughter?" A probation officer named Meghan, and Amanda, a work coordinator at Peckham Industries, a required work assignment under the judicial orders, helped her change her mindset and work ethic.

“They talked me through everything and I started doing better. They’ve always been someone I could trust; someone who can be proud of me. For once, I felt like someone actually cared,” she said. “Regular school” with its large class sizes of 35-40 students made it hard for her to concentrate, she said. But at Ingham Academy, attention from behavior specialists, instructors and other ready professionals helped her accomplish her goals. “They want to be here for you, and it really changes a lot of people’s attitudes,” Marissa said.

“If I wasn’t here, I would have been a drop-out, still doing the same stuff, getting into drama, hanging out with the wrong people,” Marissa said. “I wouldn’t have been a very good parent. I’m an all A student now and want to go to school to become a nurse practitioner to give my daughter a better life.”

Kim’s story: Kim, 17, struggled with truancy, as well, and at age 15 he was ordered to Ingham Academy, staffed by Lansing Public Schools, and the Peckham Youth Program, where he would work on employment skills. Kim had been in and out of foster care since he was 4, and by his own choice today lives with a family who served as one of his foster families. His own mother died of a heroin overdose in 2013 and his father has struggled with the same addiction Kim’s entire life.

Kim recently served on a youth panel interviewing candidates for state office for at Lansing Community College where he described how the trauma of “being ripped away” from his home as a young child continues to haunt him. He receives therapy to deal with issues stemming from that time, and he hasn’t seen his sister for five years.

Kim said he didn’t warm up to Ingham Academy right away. “I didn’t talk the first three months after I got here. I just sat in the back. But then I started doing my work, and asking for help. Pretty much whatever I needed, they tried to figure out a way to help me. And I had people to talk to when I had a bad day.”

Two staff members helped draw him out. “I’m comfortable today but not content where I’m at. I want to push myself harder. I still have trouble with absences but I feel like if I push myself harder I can graduate sooner. Without this school, I wouldn’t be anything but homeless or pretty close to it. At least they put in the effort to helping you,” Kim said.

Kim believes he can graduate by next Christmas, and has been encouraged by Peckham staff to pursue a trade skill and certificate. A trade specialist at Peckham taught him how to build a table, which sits at the entrance to the skills center today. For Kim, it’s a matter of personal pride as he shows it off to visitors one day. “I don’t think college is for me but I’d like to work in the skilled trades,” he said.

As Marissa and Kim discussed their life’s choices and future plans, they focused on how the juvenile justice system worked for them. They agree that youths Kim’s age and just a year older than Marissa should be given the same opportunities.

“We know some kids are headed to prison,” Marissa said. “The outlook is their life is basically over. If you don’t get a diploma it’s going to be harder and employers are going to look at you in a different way, like you’re the worst person in the world.”

“There’s pretty much no hope once you get in there,” Kim added. “Everybody deserves a second chance instead of locking them up and throwing away the key. You’re just kind of isolated from everything and everyone you know.”

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