

Juvenile justice face lift approved

State to subsidize ambitious plan by Delancey co-founder

By Leslie Goldberg
and Jim Herron Zamora
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

State officials have agreed to subsidize San Francisco's ambitious plan to overhaul its juvenile justice system for the next three years, rating it as the best such proposal in the state, the plan's author announced.

The California Board of Corrections agreed Thursday to pay The City nearly \$5.5 million to implement the plan over the next three years, said the plan's author, Mimi Silbert of the Delancey Street Foundation.

"It's definitely a new era for San Francisco," Silbert said Thursday night. "It allows us to change the focus of the way that things have been done. I believe that we are going to make ourselves a new national model."

The new plan would completely re-orient The City's juvenile bureaucracy into an interlocking set of programs, Silbert said, including a big effort to steer kids away from a life of crime before they get in too much trouble.

Silbert, who co-founded the nationally acclaimed Delancey Street Foundation rehabilitation program for adult criminals, described the proposal as a "circle of services" that would surround the 10 percent of juveniles who are believed to be responsible for approximately 75 percent of crimes.

"It's easy to spot these kids," she said. "We know that a lot of these kids are second- and third-generation gang members and criminals. So when we see these things, we need to move in early and start providing them with a lot of positive life-altering experiences."

The new program would include a intensive school for troubled kids in which students would be picked up at home each morning, attend programs from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., then given a ride home. In addition to academic classes, the students would be trained in "life skills" to help them function in society. Silbert's research shows that at least 50 percent of youngsters in trouble with the law don't attend school.

"This is terrific," said Charles Breyer, president of The City's Juvenile Probation Commission. "Early intervention is an area where we've fallen down in the past."

Silbert said top priorities in the plan include the creation of a "safe corridor" along Mission Street, so that youngsters, now hampered by gang territories, can travel from one end of the Mission District to another.

Silbert hopes to use a portion of the money to set up neighborhood centers in the Bayview, Mission and Tenderloin districts, where youngsters, brought in by police, could receive counseling and referrals for other agencies. The centers would be an alternative to Juvenile Hall for some youngsters in less serious trouble.

Over the years, San Francisco's juvenile justice system has been the focus of controversy. The Youth Guidance Center, which usually houses approximately 120 youngsters, most of whom are awaiting trial or sentencing, was successfully sued by the Youth Law Center in 1990 over conditions there.

A hearing to invite public comment on the Delancey Street Juvenile Justice Action Plan will be held at 5 p.m. July 9 at the Youth Guidance Center, 375 Woodside Ave. For information, call Don Chan, secretary for the Juvenile Probation Commission, at 753-7870.