

# The Crucial Role of Prosecutors in Juvenile Justice

By **Susan Broderick** | March 13, 2013

Having spent my entire professional career involved in the criminal and juvenile justice systems, I have had the opportunity to see tremendous changes in the fields.

I began working as an assistant district attorney in Manhattan in 1989, handling cases that ran the gamut from petit larceny all the way to murder. While I was never a prosecutor in juvenile court, I prosecuted hundreds of cases involving juvenile offenders. During my last three years in the DA's office, I served as the deputy bureau Chief of the Family Violence Unit and supervised the investigation and prosecution of all child abuse cases in Manhattan. As such, I saw way too many young people move from the child welfare to the juvenile justice system.

After leaving Manhattan I served as a senior attorney for the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse for the National District Attorney's Association and then as the director of the National Juvenile Justice Prosecution Center. In both positions, I once again saw the tremendous correlation between abuse, neglect and juvenile offending. One of the issues I worked on during that time was training elected DA's across the country on the need for well-trained and experienced prosecutors in juvenile court.

The role and responsibilities of the juvenile prosecutor are plentiful and extend well beyond the courtroom. In fact, in cases involving juveniles,

much of the work can and should be done outside the courtroom. Working collaboratively with other youth-serving agencies in their communities, prosecutors often play a leadership role in these efforts.

In terms of prevention, prosecutors can play a pivotal role by raising awareness in schools and public forums on the importance of education and the impact of substance abuse, truancy and mental health issues on offending. Through early intervention efforts, prosecutors can work with schools and other agencies to identify the kids who are exhibiting problem behavior or are at risk of offending and intervene as early as possible. Through the use of diversion programs, young people can be held accountable yet not get mired in a system that could have severe long-term consequences on their future.

When young people commit offenses that need to be addressed within the juvenile justice system, we can use policies and programs that focus on holding them accountable, while increasing positive changes and reducing re-offending. We can make sure that interventions include the family and that support is provided within the community. Through the use of effective interventions, the juvenile justice system can provide the motivational fulcrum necessary for change.

While most low-level offenses can be diverted from the juvenile justice system, young people who are on the pathway to serious offending need our attention. What this means in a practical sense is that we need to figure out how to identify those kids who pose a threat to community safety and not waste our limited time and resources on those who do not.

With regard to serious and violent offenders, the justice system must make sure our communities are protected, and detention may sometimes be necessary. These periods of confinement must be utilized as opportunities to address the issues that drive offending, such as behavioral health issues. There also must be more attention paid to education and training opportunities, so that when a young person leaves a facility, he or she is better equipped to lead a law-abiding life.

There have been significant changes that have taken place over the last 20 years within the field of juvenile justice and the MacArthur

Foundation's Models for Change Initiative has been at the forefront in terms of promoting these changes. With the Models for Change Initiative winding down and entering its "legacy phase," we are excited to announce that the Foundation has provided funding for the creation of a "National Resource Center for Juvenile Prosecutors" (NRCJP, or the "Center") at Georgetown University's Center for Juvenile Justice Reform (CJJR). While CJJR has served to represent the voice of prosecutors within the Models for Change Initiative since 2008, this new Center will expand the work to support juvenile court prosecutors nationwide.

The NRCJP will provide both on-site and web-based trainings along with technical assistance for prosecutors. The work of the Center will incorporate much of what has been accomplished through the Models for Change Initiative.

We have begun our work by conducting roundtable meetings with prosecutors in three regions of the country. Our advisory group, a national interdisciplinary panel of juvenile justice experts, will review the feedback from these meetings. The work of the Center will also be guided by the Juvenile Prosecutors Leadership Network (JPLN), a group of experienced and dedicated juvenile justice reform prosecutors from across the country.

NRCJP will hold a Juvenile Prosecutors Learning Collaborative, which will provide intensive training and education to juvenile prosecutors. The NRCJP will partner with some of our Models for Change colleagues to develop and launch an issue-specific, mini-certificate program on juvenile diversion practices and programming, based largely on the Juvenile Diversion Guidebook developed by the Models for Change Juvenile Diversion Workgroup.

The work spearheaded by Models for Change has been responsible for a national trend that is now spreading across the United States. No longer viewed as "soft on crime," these policies and practices have been proven effective at producing outcomes that are better for young people, make communities safer and save taxpayers' money.

Well-trained and informed prosecutors are crucial to a fair and effective system and we are excited about the role this Center will play in this new era of juvenile justice work.