Nobody likes the Youth Study Center.

The hulking five-story structure that has served as Philadelphia’s only secure juvenile detention center since 1953—a piece of “regional modernism” from an era when “modern” meant, roughly, “ugly”—has been reviled and litigated over for most of its history. Built to accommodate 105 residents, it began operating over capacity when it was still relatively new, and was already seriously and chronically overcrowded by the 1970s. After decades of struggle against age and deterioration, the building has been called a “dump” (by a city councilman), a “white elephant” (by the local press), a “dark, dirty place” (by a prominent critic), and “actually a deterrent to security” (by its own Director of Residential Services). Even its “scary, Orwellian” name has come under criticism. A succession of mayors, beginning with the Wilson Goode administration in the 1980s, has responded with proposals to tear the Youth Study Center down and start over somewhere else. Only the difficulty of finding an alternate location has saved the building—at least until now. According to recent reports, the city is negotiating to acquire a 5-acre site in West Philadelphia, where it hopes—in a few years, and at an estimated cost of $48 million—to build a new “state-of-the-art” detention center. In the meantime, the old one will have to do for a while longer.

But one aging building is only a small part of the story of juvenile detention in Philadelphia. Despite the limitations of this particular building—perhaps in some ways because of them—the city has evolved an alternative approach to the short-term supervision and detention of court-involved youth that may be a model for the state and the nation.

The last issue of Pennsylvania Progress highlighted the main findings of the Pennsylvania Juvenile Detention Assessment Project, a statewide study undertaken by the National Center for Juvenile Justice for the Detention Steering Committee of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency’s Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Committee. It offered a kind of wide-angle shot of juvenile detention as it is currently practiced in Pennsylvania. This issue will focus in more closely on detention and its alternatives in Philadelphia—and in the process may give some indication of the shape of things to come in this field.
It doesn’t seem to have been the result of anybody’s master plan. Philadelphia’s innovative, streamlined, ultra-flexible approach to the problem of securing the public’s safety while ensuring juveniles’ attendance at hearings has emerged from decades of conflict and collaboration, court orders and compromises. “It’s been a long time coming,” says Jim Randolph, Director of Court and Community Services for Philadelphia’s Department of Human Services (DHS), which operates the Youth Study Center and oversees alternatives to detention as well. “It’s still evolving.”

But what is it? Nothing will begin to convey that better than a few eye-opening numbers:

- **Secure bed capacity.** The Youth Study Center has one secure bed for every 3,450 Philadelphia juveniles. This per capita ratio is lower than the average for Pennsylvania juvenile detention facilities, but not entirely out of line with them; it is roughly equivalent to that of Westmoreland County, for example (one bed for every 3,415 juveniles). Nine other county facilities actually have lower per capita bed capacities. But when compared with the number of local juveniles who are arrested each year, Philadelphia’s secure bed capacity is astonishingly low. Westmoreland County had only 1,439 juvenile arrests in 2001, so that it had one secure bed for every 59 arrests; this is comparable to the ratio for Allegheny (1 in 53), Dauphin (1 in 55) and many other Pennsylvania counties. Philadelphia had just one secure bed for every 288 juveniles arrested that year.7

- **Length of stay.** How do they manage? The Youth Study Center’s length-of-stay data suggest part of the answer. According to the Final Report of the Pennsylvania Juvenile Detention Assessment Project, outside of Philadelphia, the median juvenile detention stay lasted 9 days in 2001, and the average was 15 days. In Philadelphia, the median stay was just 2 days and the average was 8 days—and even these numbers have come down since. Figures released this spring by DHS indicate that the average length of stay at the Center fell to 7.7 days in 2002, and was down to 6.9 days in the first part of 2003.8

- **Alternative utilization.** In addition to the state’s fastest turnaround times, Philadelphia has the state’s richest array of non-secure detention alternatives—and certainly its highest ratio of alternative slots to secure beds. Few data are collected regarding the actual use of alternatives to detention in the rest of the state, but the Detention Assessment Project found that detention alternatives were not universally available, and that they were not always given systematic consideration as part of the admissions decision-making process. In response to a statewide survey conducted as part of the project, Pennsylvania’s chief juvenile probation officers estimated that on an average day, there were a few more juveniles (about 8% more on average) in alternative programs than in detention centers in their counties.9 In Philadelphia, by contrast, there are about nine available slots in non-secure alternative programs for every secure bed in the Youth Study Center. And those slots are heavily used: on the day of a recent visit to the Youth Study Center, for example, when the Center’s population stood at 90, Philadelphia’s non-secure community-based shelters, in-home detention services, electronic monitoring, intensive supervision and other detention alternative programs were serving 873 juveniles.

If these numbers reflect a radical shift away from traditional detention practice—largely substituting individualized supervision and non-secure care for locked doors and barred windows, and without sacrificing community
safety—those who have participated in the shift point to three things that have made it possible. Collaboration that has embraced critics and opponents as well as system insiders. Active oversight from the local bench. And an intense, system-wide focus on using the whole continuum of non-secure options to keep the population of secure detainees within prescribed limits.

THE SANTIAGO LEGACY

It all started, as so many things in America do, with a lawsuit. *Santiago v. City of Philadelphia* was a federal class action filed in 1974 on behalf of 15 juveniles detained at the Youth Study Center, alleging unconstitutional conditions of confinement there, most notably severe overcrowding. At the time, it was common for the Youth Study Center population to approach 200 juveniles—though the facility’s licensed capacity, then as now, was just 105. In human terms, numbers like that translate into misery. “Kids sleeping in bunk beds, staff working double-shifts,” Jim Randolph says. “More kids acting out, more frayed nerves. More incidents.” Many of the Center’s residents at the time were not alleged to be dangerous, or even to have committed crimes—Pennsylvania law still permitted the secure detention of runaways, truants, and other status offenders. “Philadelphia used the Youth Study Center as a home of last resort,” Family Court Judge Kevin Dougherty says. But few alternatives to secure holding were then available, in Philadelphia or anywhere else.

*Santiago* didn’t magically solve all that, or even come close. Overcrowding at the Youth Study Center continued to be a problem long after the entry of the consent decree that settled the case in 1978—imposing facility “admission standards” based on the Juvenile Justice Standards for detention promulgated by the American Bar Association and Institute for Judicial Administration. The original *Santiago* decree was formally redrawn several times in an effort to find a better formula. In 1985, the “admission standards” were replaced with “population standards,” which in turn gave way in 1988 to a flat, court-ordered “population cap.” But violations were alleged all along the way, and countless motions to enforce compliance were filed.

Eventually, in 1990, the Juvenile Law Center, plaintiffs’ counsel in the *Santiago* dispute, sat down to a formal, three-day mediation with representatives of the city’s Law Department, its Department of Human Services, the Family Court, the state Department of Public Welfare, and others who held key pieces of the Philadelphia detention puzzle, in an attempt to work out a long-term solution to Youth Study Center overcrowding. According to Bob Schwartz—a recent graduate of the Temple University School of Law when he first took on the job of representing the *Santiago* plaintiffs, but by now the respected Executive Director of the Juvenile Law Center—“It was not an easy three days….It took until the third day to make a dent in 15 years’ worth of mistrust and fingerpointing.”

But the mediation did yield agreement on some significant issues, including the beginnings of a system for tracking, monitoring, and responding to detention population swings. More importantly, it established what turned out to be a permanent structure for collaborative detention planning—a group of key players, including both traditional insiders and outsiders, system people and system critics, that would meet monthly as the “Juvenile Justice Policy Board” (later the “Juvenile Justice Stakeholders”) to work out disputes and solve problems as they came up.

“We both monitor and help,” Schwartz says of the part his organization now plays in Philadelphia’s detention system. “We’re not just critics. We’re constructive critics. We have a good working relationship with the nominal ‘defendants.’ We’ll do our best to help them succeed. We don’t want to spend our time litigating when there are other ways to get results.”
“It’s very useful to have outsiders who both respect and have the respect of insiders. At the end of the day, we at the Juvenile Law Center don’t run anything. We need those who run the system to succeed.”

By all accounts, one of the most important ways in which Judge Reynolds has helped to improve the detention picture in Philadelphia has been by working to eliminate delinquency hearing backlogs and improve overall case processing efficiency in the Family Court. Many local observers can recall times when it routinely took 6 months or more to get a delinquency case to adjudication. Now, they say, it’s more like 6 weeks. Not only do timeframes like that shorten average detention stays and free up beds faster—they greatly expand the population of accused juveniles who can be safely managed without detention.

“Pre-trial detention is a short-term risk management problem,” Bob Schwartz points out. “If you want to minimize risk between the time of arrest and the time of trial, have quick trials.” Schwartz is among those who believe that “spectacular case processing” is what has really relieved the pressure on the Youth Study Center.

But Judge Reynolds has also contributed in more direct ways, by using his considerable authority as Supervising Judge to respond to unforeseen swings in the Youth Study Center’s population. Ambrose recalls two times in the previous 6 months when the population numbers crept up above the Center’s licensed capacity of 105. Both times, she says, “I called the judge and the next day we were in the 80s.”

“It’s really about talking to each other,” Ambrose adds. “It’s really about not being afraid to pick up the phone.”

Judge Reynolds himself calls the current relationship between the Family Court and DHS “a partnership.” As he recently announced to a conference audience, “We work together here in Philadelphia.”

To which a DHS official in the audience called back, “You’re right, your honor, as always.”
Alameda County, California, with a population about equal to Philadelphia’s, has a juvenile detention center that is nearly three times the size of the Youth Study Center.

And it needs to be bigger, officials there say.

As Philadelphia continues to experiment with non-secure detention alternatives, case processing improvements, and other “soft” measures to relieve pressure on its juvenile detention facility, Alameda County in California’s East Bay area offers an instructive—and some would say cautionary—counter-example. What it may well illustrate is the fundamental futility of responding to detention crowding by investing in detention alone.

Like the Youth Study Center, the existing Alameda County Juvenile Hall in San Leandro is a 50-year-old facility that serves the whole county, including the city of Oakland. It too is outmoded and difficult to maintain, frequently operates beyond its capacity, and according to the county “has been overcrowded for the past ten years.” The difference is that it has 299 beds. Not only is it far bigger than the Youth Study Center in both absolute and per capita terms—it simply dwarfs the Center in terms of its ratio of secure beds to annual juvenile arrests: with one secure bed for every 26 juvenile arrests in 2000, Alameda County had almost ten times the real detention capacity of Philadelphia that year.

It wasn’t enough. In fact, the County Board of Supervisors has been determined to replace the San Leandro facility with a considerably larger one for years. In 1999, the Board directed its staff to begin planning for an immense, 540-bed detention center—dubbed the “Super-Jail” by local critics—to be constructed at an estimated cost of $236 million. After a lengthy public debate, the proposed facility was scaled back to 450 beds, then to 420 beds. (The latter figure was arrived at on the basis of “youth population projections, and studies reviewing many factors which impact the need for juvenile detention beds,” according to an information page on the county’s web site.) Finally, in May of this year, Alameda County Supervisors bowed to pressure from local opposition groups and voted to approve a “small” 360-bed replacement facility, to be constructed on the same San Leandro site as the old juvenile hall, at an estimated cost of $177 million. The complex, which will include a new juvenile courthouse as well as a detention center, is scheduled to open in 2006.

Following the May vote, however, according to one newspaper account, Supervisor Gail Steele worried that the planned new facility “might not be big enough.” And she could be right. If 299 juvenile detention beds are not adequate, why should 360—or for that matter 540—do the job? Just as regional traffic planners are beginning to realize that the solution to traffic jams is not, as you might think, more asphalt—that in fact, as one recent study concluded, “widening and building new highways actually causes, not relieves, traffic congestion”—juvenile justice leaders may one day come to similar conclusions about the “Super-Jail” approach to relieving detention overcrowding. Investment in bed capacity, after all, tends to be a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Worse, it rules out other, potentially more productive uses of funds, and distracts attention away from system inefficiencies that may go farther toward explaining overcrowding than the number of beds available. According to Alameda County’s own figures, for example, the average length of stay in its existing detention facility is 23 days—or three times the average Youth Study Center stay.

Is there anything that $177 million could do about that?

On a day-to-day basis, keeping Philadelphia’s secure detention population within licensed limits takes system-wide vigilance—and an aggressively proactive response to symptoms of crowding that Jim Randolph calls “attack mode.”

It starts with always knowing “the number”—that is, the Youth Study Center’s overnight population count.

Anne Marie Ambrose calls the Center first thing every morning, on her drive in to work, for the number. Administrative Judge Myrna Field likewise gets the number every day, along with every other Family Court judge, in a memo from the Center’s intake department. So does Bob Schwartz and his staff at the Juvenile Law Center. It’s a way for everybody to keep tabs, detect drifts, avoid surprises. Schwartz calls it “taking the Center’s temperature.”

When the temperature rises to 100, attack mode—“a vigilant search for every kid who can move,” according to Jim Randolph’s definition—begins. Some of this activity occurs at the Center’s back door, and involves finding ways to speed up the transfer of adjudicated juveniles to residential institutions in which the court has already ordered them placed. But there is also plenty of what might be called “side-door” movement—from secure to non-secure pre-trial supervision programs.

In any case, attack mode starts early nowadays. “A few years ago, [100 residents] would have been acceptable,” Randolph says. “There’s been a change in culture—we don’t wait till the numbers go way up.”

Youth Study Center Intake Supervisor Rafaela Pagan and Assistant Supervisor Steve Masciantonio oversee the collection and dissemination of the detention population data that drives this early warning system—not just the raw count of detainees but more detailed daily breakdowns showing male and female totals, pre- and post-adjudication figures, numbers awaiting transfers and review hearings, “long-stay” cases, and daily counts for the various community-based detention shelters and other non-secure programs. They agree that the institutional culture has changed. Solving problems, clearing snags, creating movement has become part of the Youth Study Center’s mission. “That’s on everybody’s mind,” Masciantonio says. “If possible, try to step them down. During the last four years, it became our responsibility to get kids out….It just became our duty. We made an extra job for ourselves.”

All this movement, shifting, and transferring is possible only in a system with a flexible range of pre-hearing risk-management options—a true “detention continuum.” As a practical matter, however, Philadelphia juveniles who are judged to be capable of moving out of secure detention tend to be stepped down directly to local detention shelters—temporary residential facilities where constant staff supervision provides a measure of structure and security for youth who may not be able to get by without them. DHS has contracts with 5 providers for a total of 191 community-based detention shelter beds. It relies more heavily on this alternative to detention than any other—sending about 2,800 juveniles to such shelters annually. Their average length of stay there is 17-18 days.11

“Community-based shelters take the heat off the Youth Study Center,” admits Jim Randolph. “So many kids go right from the Youth Study Center to CBDS.” Despite the name, facilities like these are not necessarily home-like, and residents may retain little connection with their actual communities. In fact, one heavily-used shelter is a 90-bed institution located more than 40 miles from the city! Critics like Bob Schwartz wonder whether Philadelphia’s shelter slots are not overused, needlessly cutting juveniles off from their families and depriving them of the opportunity to show that
they can be trusted living at home. His assumption is that the availability of the shelter option has simply widened the net of social control, placing “too many kids under pre-trial supervision that could be released.”

But even Schwartz admits that a shelter is “not as bad as an overcrowded detention center.”

In any case, Philadelphia has the state’s broadest range of in-home supervision alternatives to detention as well. As Randolph says, “I’m always struck by what other folk don’t have, that I take for granted.” In-home options include the following:

♦ 268 “Pre-Hearing Intensive Supervision” (PHIS) slots available from two local providers, the Juvenile Justice Center and the Philadelphia Youth Advocate Program. This is the light end of the detention continuum, in which juveniles’ behavior is monitored primarily by way of visits from program representatives 3 to 7 times a week, and telephone calls twice a day. Juveniles’ families and schools may be contacted as well. PHIS is generally used either as an initial post-arrest option or as a step-down following stabilization in a shelter; on the other hand, failure in the program may lead to a step-up to a shelter or secure detention placement. A total of about 1,000 Philadelphia juveniles were supervised in this way in the 2002 fiscal year, staying in the program an average of 35 days.

♦ 282 “In-Home Detention” (IHD) slots from four providers, including Northeast Treatment Center and Vision Quest as well as the Juvenile Justice Center and the Philadelphia Youth Advocate Program. This is a more intensive form of pre-trial supervision, in which the juvenile receives at least 22 hours of one-on-one contact with a program representative per week, in addition to service referrals and advocacy. It may be used with or without house restrictions. Again, IHD may be imposed by a judge or master at an initial hearing, or used as a step-down from secure or non-secure residential detention. Failure to comply with IHD conditions and curfew may in turn result in a step-up to a shelter or the Youth Study Center. According to DHS, about 1,200 are served by IHD programs annually, staying in the programs for an average of 30 days.

♦ A flexible number of “Voice Tracking System” (VTS) and “Electronic Monitoring” (EM) slots. Juvenile probation officers directly oversee supervision of juveniles under these programs, which represent still more intensive monitoring options. VTS restricts juveniles’ movements and tracks their whereabouts by requiring them to make regular phone calls to a host computer, both on a pre-arranged schedule and in response to random pages. Youth on EM are monitored using tracking bracelets and in-home homing devices, but also through face-to-face and telephone contacts with probation officers. DHS estimates that 25 to 40 VTS slots and 85 EM slots are used per day—but again, these options can be expanded as the need arises. On the otherwise typical day referred to earlier, when the alternative-to-secure detention population ratio stood at 873-to-90, a total of 57 juveniles were being monitored through VTS and 133 were on EM.

♦ 33 “Detention Diversion Advocacy Program” (DDAP) slots. This unusual program, operated by the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, provides the most intensive of the nonresidential supervision options, using a combination of frequent contact, case management and service advocacy to provide pre-trial structure and support to many who would otherwise require secure detention—including juveniles facing serious charges, juveniles with multiple contacts with the juvenile justice system, and juveniles who have failed in other detention alternatives.
With an array of pre-trial shelter and supervision alternatives that is already capable of accommodating up to 900 juveniles a day, Philadelphia continues to develop and invest in new options. For example, DHS recently added a much-needed community-based shelter program especially for girls. A local Court and Community Services Planning Group meets regularly to discuss other gaps in services and ways to fill them. There’s money to work with, DHS’s Anne Marie Ambrose points out, including federal funds under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and Title IV-E programs, which help cover many of the costs associated with detention alternatives. Not to mention all the money Philadelphia saves by avoiding over-reliance on secure holding—by far the most expensive means of controlling juveniles. “The fact is,” Ambrose says, “we’re a well-resourced system.”

DETENTION DIVERSION ADVOCACY: AN ALTERNATIVE FOR TOUGH CASES

It’s easy to devise a detention “alternative” for juveniles who were never going to be locked up anyway. Too often, critics charge, nominal alternatives to detention do little more than scoop up the easy cases—nonviolent, entry-level offenders who pose little or no risk to the community, even without formal supervision—while selecting out the hard ones. That’s why the existence of alternative programs sometimes does nothing to reduce local reliance on secure detention—they’re not even focusing on the same group of kids. And it may explain Philadelphia’s experience beginning in the 1980s, when the development of substantial alternative capacity seemed for many years to have negligible effects on Youth Study Center overcrowding.

The Detention Diversion Advocacy Project (DDAP) was conceived as something different—a real alternative to secure detention. The program is based on a model developed in the early 1990s by the Center on Juvenile & Criminal Justice (CJCJ) in San Francisco, and has been operated by CJCJ in Philadelphia since 2001. DDAP uses what its originators call an “intensive case management strategy” to monitor and support juveniles who would otherwise, according to traditional notions, make excellent detention candidates—including those currently accused of aggravated assault, drug-dealing and other serious offenses, those with extensive prior records, and even those with histories of failure in pre-adjudication supervision programs.

In brief, DDAP works like this:

♦ **Referral and selection.** Potential DDAP clients in custody are typically called to the program’s attention by judges, masters, attorneys, probation officers, or detention staff, after which they are interviewed and evaluated for suitability by a DDAP representative at the Youth Study Center or the Family Court building. DDAP’s Program Director Darold Williams has made this initial judgment call plenty of times, and admits it’s a subjective one: “Is he really a bad kid,” he asks, “or a kid in a bad situation?” Nevertheless, DDAP seems to have done a good job of avoiding the temptation to scoop up easy cases. An evaluation of the program’s first-year performance by the Center for Excellence in Municipal Management at George Washington University found that DDAP clients resembled a randomly matched set of Youth Study Center detainees in terms of the seriousness of the offenses with which they were charged—and that if anything, DDAP handled a larger proportion of accused felons (59%) than the detention center (51%).

♦ **Pre-trial release.** Once a youth has been identified as a good DDAP candidate, a program case manager presents the judge or master with an individualized detention release plan detailing pre-trial services the juvenile will receive while in the program and objectives that he or she will be required to fulfill. If the judge or master accepts the plan, the juvenile is released to DDAP supervision, but may be returned to the Youth Study Center under a bench warrant at the DDAP case manager’s request.

♦ **Monitoring.** An important part of the DDAP approach to supervising juveniles is frequent personal contact, including in-home visits from an assigned case manager twice a day during the first week, plus a third visit each evening from an assigned night monitor. (There’s a weekend monitor too.) Initially, the case manager must pre-
The increased use of non-secure alternatives to the Youth Study Center does not seem to have imposed additional costs in terms of crime or public disorder either. As Bob Schwartz puts it, when it comes to community safety, “No news is good news.”

“The community hasn’t suffered,” Judge Reynolds says. “Kids haven’t suffered.”

A MODEL SYSTEM?

Despite the vast improvements that have been made in recent years in Philadelphia’s approach to detention, nobody’s claiming the system is perfect.

One piece that all parties admit is still missing is a means of accurately and consistently assessing risks to inform detention decision-

approve any activities outside the home, but both the visitation schedule and the restrictions on movements may be relaxed after the first week. A minimum of three in-person meetings a week must be maintained at all times, however, and case managers maintain contact with families, teachers, employers and others as well. DDAP staff carry small caseloads—just 11 clients each for 3 case managers and 3 night monitors, which is why the program can only accommodate 33 juveniles at a time.

♦ **Advocacy and services.** Case managers see to it that time spent in the program isn’t wasted—that juveniles get the tutoring, school advocacy, individual and family counseling, drug treatment, anger management, parenting classes, vocational help and other services DDAP assessments indicate they need. While clients are still in custody, Darold Williams says, they’re asked to read DDAP informational materials out loud, both to make sure they understand the conditions of supervision and “to see if they can read.” He cites the case of a pregnant Hispanic girl who, before coming to DDAP, had “violated every [pre-trial supervision] program,” until DDAP was “called in as a last resort,” he says. “We straightened her out, got her back in school, worked on her relationship with her mother, enrolled her in prenatal programs, parenting programs….DDAP stepped up to the plate and advocated for her.” Eventually, this advocacy extended to convincing her probation officer that she had progressed so much that a recommendation of placement was no longer warranted.

♦ **Case results.** As the previous example indicates, DDAP’s definition of success embraces much more than merely keeping clients from committing new crimes or missing hearings while awaiting adjudication. Even though it’s only supposed to be an alternative to detention, there’s reason to believe that participation in DDAP is changing case outcomes—by giving juveniles tangible help and a chance to prove they can be trusted. According to DDAP’s own data, only about 7% of the first 250 juveniles to go through the program ended up receiving dispositions involving placement in residential facilities. Most were either placed on probation and ordered to continue with the service plans initiated for them by DDAP, or else had their cases dismissed altogether.

♦ **Recidivism.** Although the DDAP approach is still relatively new to Philadelphia, an evaluation of the more established program site in San Francisco, published in 1999 by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, found that DDAP handled higher-risk youth than those in a comparison group of securely detained juveniles, but had a significantly lower recidivism rate than those who were detained—a 34% rate overall, compared with 60% for the comparison group. The DDAP group was also significantly less likely down the road to have multiple referrals, be subject to multiple petitions, or be charged with violent crimes.

Again, with a maximum capacity of just 33 juveniles, DDAP is too small a program to make much of a dent in Philadelphia’s overall detention population. But as a demonstration of the expanded possibilities of pre-trial supervision in the community—not to mention the benefits that can flow from giving more serious offenders a chance at it—DDAP can have an impact on the thinking of everyone in the system.

making. The Youth Study Center’s guiding admission principle, as bluntly stated by Bob Schwartz, is “You have 105 beds. Use them for the worst kids.” But while there are certain minimum standards for admission to the Center—such as the rule, stemming from the Santiago settlement, that a juvenile must be at least 13 and must generally be charged with a felony or first-degree misdemeanor to be securely detained—there is no systematic mechanism for assuring that the “worst kids” principle is actually being followed by those who make admissions decisions. In interviews conducted for the Detention Assessment Project, one master candidly cited “gut feelings” as the ultimate basis for admissions decisions. The Final Report of the Pennsylvania Juvenile Detention Assessment Project included an analysis of Youth Study Center data on “reasons for detention” for the years 1997 through 2001, which found that for admissions involving one charge only, juveniles admitted to the Center in connection with property and drug offenses outnumbered those accused of person offenses more than two to one. A separate analysis of 1999 admissions conducted by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency found that, for significant numbers of juveniles securely detained that year, the most serious charges were theft (more than 1,000 cases), drug possession (more than 700 cases), and even public disorder offenses (161 cases).

None of this by itself indicates that juveniles are being unnecessarily detained at the Youth Study Center. But experts warn that unstructured, subjective admissions decision-making can lead to overuse of detention. That’s why they generally advocate the use of a valid screening instrument to guide admissions decisions.

Philadelphians have heard these arguments, however, and don’t seem entirely convinced. When asked about the lack of a risk assessment instrument in the Philadelphia approach, Jim Randolph shrugs. “We never settled upon anything the Family Court was comfortable with,” he says. “We’ve been turning the numbers around so dramatically without it….There’s no pressure now for this.”

Even Bob Schwartz is skeptical of the value of structured risk assessment in Philadelphia. Such instruments tend to be based on “the lowest common denominator of risk,” he says. He cites what he says was the experience in Cook County, Illinois, where the introduction of a formal instrument resulted in more detention, not less—in fact, detention “exploded” there, he says.

But in a broader sense, those involved in reforming Philadelphia’s detention system are concerned about the absence of structure—and the danger that the gains they have achieved will prove too dependent on individual leadership, relationships, and gut feelings. Anne Marie Ambrose herself worries that “it’s not institutionalized enough.”

“How do we sustain the progress that we’ve made?” she says.

When asked whether Philadelphia could serve as a model for the nation, Bob Schwartz answers, “Yes and no. Yes because Judge Reynolds’ and Anne Marie Ambrose’s work and the cooperation of the stakeholders proved that we can protect the public without cramming kids unnecessarily into a detention center. [But] Philadelphia has to create a permanent structure.” Its recent progress, he said, is “too tied to the people, not to structures.” And speaking of structures, the Youth Study Center—despite its age, despite its admitted inadequacies—is still Philadelphia’s only juvenile detention center. One walk through it, Judge Dougherty points out, “reminds you that we still have a long way to go.”
MEETINGS OF THE MINDS

Detention reform in Philadelphia has largely been a product of ongoing collaboration among a range of agencies with juvenile justice responsibilities. But this is not the only area in which meetings of the minds have yielded progress in Philadelphia. Among other unusual collaborations that have benefited the city’s youth:

♦ **Grants review.** The Philadelphia Grants Review Group (PGRG) has been meeting since 1998 to review all funding requests submitted by Philadelphia youth-serving agencies to the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency and its Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Committee, making recommendations to the latter regarding funding decisions and priorities. The idea is to achieve broad consensus on a plan to target resources and stick to it, rather than allow state and federal juvenile justice money to trickle haphazardly into a hundred random channels. In a jurisdiction as big and complicated as Philadelphia—and on a matter as vital as funding—that takes a lot of coordination and compromise. PGRG meetings bring together officials of agencies already represented on the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Committee, including DHS, the District Attorney’s office and the Juvenile Law Center, with representatives of the Family Court, the Police Department, the Department of Health, the Philadelphia School District, and the Defender Association, among others.

♦ **Services planning.** Representatives of many of these same agencies confer as part of the Philadelphia Court and Community Services Planning Group. Convened by DHS, this task force meets regularly to identify and discuss strategies to fill gaps in services to court-involved juveniles in Philadelphia.

♦ **Youth Violence Reduction Project.** This unique multi-agency partnership aims at reducing youth homicide in three Philadelphia police districts through coordinated police-probation surveillance and supervision of select groups of juveniles and young adults judged most at risk of killing or being killed. As Deputy District Attorney John Delaney told a conference audience this spring, “We had a very good system for making sure 120 young people were murdered every year. In order to change that outcome, we had to change the strategy.” YVRP youth are chosen by a selection committee, primarily on the basis of their involvement in drug crime, violence, and weapons offenses, for what is essentially a more intrusive and lengthy form of probation, featuring frequent home visits, nighttime probation—police enforcement sweeps, and monitoring and support from neighborhood “street workers.” The idea is not necessarily to turn out model citizens, but to keep targeted young people—as the program’s slogan puts it—“Alive at 25.” YVRP is a product of collaboration and planning on the part of the District Attorney’s office, the Police Department, Juvenile and Adult Probation, the Family Court, DHS, the School District, and a number of other public and private agencies.

ENDNOTES

2. Ibid.
3. Testimony of Robert G. Schwartz, Executive Director, Juvenile Law Center, Before the Philadelphia City Council Committee on Public Health, Human Services, and Recreation, on the Condition of the Youth Study Center, June 22, 1994.
4. McDonald, supra, n. 1, quoting Thomas Quick.
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