

Who will look out for DYS 'inmates'?

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IT'S SAD to note that children's advocacy groups in Massachusetts are pining for an ombudsman to represent children caught up in the Department of Youth Services ("[Ombudsman sought for youths in custody](#)," City & Region, March 3). Apparently, another bureaucracy is needed to watch the watchers.

Since we replaced the state's reform schools with "alternative" programs, managerialism has become the prevailing ideology of DYS. A Faustian bargain was struck that set loose the all-too-familiar dark impulses that tend to haunt those who impose services on inmates, be they captives of the euphemistically labeled "juvenile justice" system or the more bizarrely limned "child welfare" system. It's now de rigueur to send troubled and troublesome adolescents to locked, privately run "mental health" facilities. This, despite the dismal history of services dispensed in such settings. Concomitantly, small (occasionally messy and unpredictable) programs have been effectively replaced by a few behemoth agencies that purport to provide a range of services.

The preferred lexicon of the professionals provides terms such as "alternative punishments," "setting limits," and "structured environments" - usually code for rationalizing isolation, neglect, and occasional staff violence. It's all part of a rush from using politically unacceptable words like "care," "help," or "concern" when it comes to handling delinquents.

Unfortunately, it looks as though survival of the reforms once presented by Massachusetts to a nation besotted with a violent, decency-deprived juvenile justice system continues to be a matter of chance, of politics and mood.

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