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Juvenile Justice Conference Bringing Local and National Experts to Madison WCCF Hosting Two-Day Meeting on Shaping the Future of Juvenile Justice Policy

On Tuesday and Wednesday, March 30 and 31, the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) will host a multi-disciplinary conference at the Concourse Hotel in Madison aimed at shaping the future of juvenile justice in Wisconsin. The conference, “Fulfilling the Promise of Juvenile Justice: Shaping the Future Begins Now,” will bring together local and national experts along with individuals working in juvenile justice across the state to discuss promising practices, policy options and current issues facing juvenile justice professionals. Participants will explore where juvenile justice has been, what can work for the future, and what research tells us about how to create a system that will best serve our youth, our families and our communities.

In addition to workshops highlighting successes in Wisconsin, the conference will feature plenary presentations by:

Bernardine Dohrn, Associate Clinical Professor at Northwestern University School of Law’s Bluhm Legal Clinic, and founder and former director of the Children and Family Justice Center, a national policy center on the comprehensive needs of adolescents and their families. She has written extensively on juvenile justice-related issues and is vice chair of the Human Rights Watch Children’s Rights Division, a member of the steering committee of the Midwest Human Rights Coalition, and on the board of the Burns Institute, San Francisco.

Reginald Dwayne Betts, award-winning author of *A Question of Freedom*, a coming-of-age story with the unique twist that it takes place in prison. At the age of sixteen, Betts—a good student from a lower-middle-class family—helped a friend commit a carjacking. He had never held a gun before, but within a matter of minutes he had committed six felonies. A bright young kid, he served his nine-year sentence as part of the adult population in some of the worst prisons in the state. His writing captures the experience that so many young men of color are facing today.

Mark Carey, a nationally recognized expert on best practices in criminal and juvenile justice. Mark has served as the President of the American Probation and Parole Association, worked for over 20 years in the Minnesota corrections system, and has published over a dozen articles and two books related to justice system issues.

Anne Seymour, a Wisconsin native, is the co-founder of and senior advisor to Justice Solutions, a D.C.-based nonprofit specializing on issues of victim’s rights and community safety. Seymour is a nationally recognized expert on victim’s rights and has authored or contributed to over 30 publications of the Office of Crime Victim Services. She has appeared on national television shows, including the Oprah Winfrey Show, Frontline, Crossfire, and Larry King Live.

This conference takes place as the Wisconsin Legislature is considering legislation to return 17-year-old offenders to the original jurisdiction of the juvenile court, reversing a policy-- implemented in 1996 during a flurry of "tough-on-crime" legislation nationwide. The Assembly Committee on Corrections and the Courts is scheduled to conduct a hearing on the bill, AB-732, on April 1.

WCCF Executive Director Ken Taylor notes, "We know more than ever about adolescent brain development and what works with youthful offenders. Yet we continue to treat 17-year-olds as adults despite knowing that it can actually decrease community safety, cost more in the long run, and cause harm to some youth."

WCCF Deputy Directory Jim Moeser, who has worked in juvenile justice in Wisconsin for 35 years, believes that Wisconsin's juvenile justice system of today is not the same as it was when the law was changed more than a decade ago. "Our system is smarter and more cost-effective than ever before," Moeser said. "Thanks to recent research on what works and on what adolescents need, we have opportunities to make real progress on addressing some key challenges, including reducing racial disparities and continuing the trends of reducing juvenile crime."

"The main goals of our juvenile justice policy should be to keep communities safe, promote youth's understanding of the impact of their behaviors on the community, and to help youth who come into contact with the system mature into responsible adults," Moeser said. "We're learning how to do that a little better every year, and conferences like this one are where professionals in the field can come together and help shape a better future for our communities and our youth."

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