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Onalaska Woman Receives National Mother of Distinction Award Son's Death in Adult Jail Ignited Her Activism

The Campaign for Youth Justice (CFYJ) and the National Juvenile Justice Network (NJJN) have named Vicky Gunderson of Onalaska recipient of this year's National Mother of Distinction Award. This honor is presented each Mother's Day to one or more mothers who have made an outstanding contribution toward reforming the juvenile justice system. Gunderson was selected for her work on the issue of youth incarcerated in adult jails and prisons. In addition to a special plaque, she will receive a \$100 gift certificate from [Sue Kolve's Salon & Day Spa](#) and a one-night stay on the Plaza Club floor at the [Radisson Hotel La Crosse](#). The award is being presented on Friday, May 9 at the Radisson Hotel La Crosse. Gunderson was nominated for the honor by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families.

"We are proud of Vicky and her persistence in calling for juvenile justice reform," said Liz Ryan, executive director of CFYJ. "There are too many kids locked up in adult facilities in Wisconsin and the rest of the United States. Through the work of Vicky and other dedicated advocates, we can make an impact across the country."

At the age of 17, Vicky's son Kirk was incarcerated as an adult in the La Crosse County jail. After nearly seven months there, he took his own life. Since losing her son, Gunderson has become a leading advocate in Wisconsin for keeping youth out of adult jails and prisons. She has worked closely with the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) and other interested individuals and organizations to promote legislation that would return 17-year-olds in the state to the juvenile justice system. She has spoken at numerous conferences and other public events, and has written guest columns that have appeared in several newspapers. Her words, and those of her late son, were featured in the Campaign for Youth Justice's recent report, [Jailing Juveniles](#).

"We realize that something will be missing for Vicky and her family this Mother's Day," said Sarah Bryer, director of NJJN. "We can only hope that by raising awareness of this issue, we can bring about changes that will spare other families the pain and devastation the Gunderson's have experienced."

An estimated 200,000 youth are tried, sentenced or incarcerated as adults every year across the United States. Most of the youth prosecuted in adult court are charged with nonviolent offenses and as many as half of the young people held in adult jails are returned to juvenile court or not convicted. However, most of them will have spent at least one month in an adult jail, and one in five will, like Kirk, have spent over six months in jail.

In Wisconsin, all 17-year-olds are treated as adults for any crime. Each year in Wisconsin nearly 30,000 17-year-olds are arrested, the vast majority of whom are accused of nonviolent crimes.

“Parents like Vicky help remind us that this issue is not just some abstract debate,” said WCCF Juvenile Justice Policy Analyst Wendy Henderson. “Real families are being hurt by the current policy.”

Research shows that placing youth in the adult system decreases public safety and puts young people in danger. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, youth who are transferred from the juvenile court system to the adult criminal system are approximately 34 percent more likely than youth retained in the juvenile court system to be re-arrested for violent or other crime. They are 36 times more likely to commit suicide in an adult jail than in a juvenile detention facility.

The Campaign for Youth Justice (CFYJ) is dedicated to ending the practice of trying, sentencing and incarcerating youth under the age of 18 in the adult criminal justice system. For more information, visit www.campaignforyouthjustice.org.

The National Juvenile Justice Network (NJJN) enhances the capacity of state-based, juvenile justice organizations to advocate for fair, equitable and developmentally appropriate adjudication and treatment for all children, youth and families involved in the juvenile justice system. For more information, visit www.njjn.org.

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families is a statewide, nonpartisan, nonprofit, multi-issue advocacy organization that works to improve the lives of Wisconsin's children and families. WCCF: Raising voices to make every kid count. For more information, visit <http://www.wccf.org>.