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January 3, 2017

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RE: Mikva - Juvenile Justice Council Collaboration

In April of 2015, the Cook County Department of Facilities Management received a request from President Preckwinkle via the Cook County Justice Advisory Council to meet with youth of the Mikva Challenge, Juvenile Justice Council. The request was to meet. The reflection reveals a lot more.

During the first of several meetings, the JJC met with me and the Deputy in Facilities. They shared their thoughts, views, and a documented outline of necessary improvements and thoughtful insights as to how justice involved children, detained at the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center could be better served in the areas of legislation, information sharing, processing, and environmental changes. As Director of the Department of Facilities Management, the physical plant of JTDC is within the portfolio of the 12 million square feet of Cook County property under my responsibility along with our 500 janitors, engineers, and skilled trades, in the realm of building operations and maintenance.

It was an absolute joy and pleasure to meet with the JJC and their mentor, Emma Kornfeld. What a refreshing change of pace to be surrounded by approximately 15 energized youth, compared to my regular meetings. Interacting with these youths revealed that they are informed, intelligent, outspoken, enthusiastic, thoughtful, and most important, prepared. While their presence and charisma was inspiring, it was how they substantiated the reason/purpose for the recommendations that was most motivating and caused an immediate internalized commitment that we would do what we could to bring their ideas to life.

In reviewing the outline set forth by the JJC, the recommendations regarding environmental changes revealed where DFM could effect change, as well as provide the resources for leadership at JTDC to implement supplemental methods for information sharing. The main changes involved an increase in color, inspirational art/text, colored flooring, etc. These changes would be more youth friendly, stimulating, and support resiliency, as indicated in the outline from the JJC.

Subsequent meetings were attended by JTDC leadership to follow up on changes they could make and to review/approve the changes DFM would make. DFM staff embraced the recommendations. They were more than willing to help improve environmental quality in a positive way. This required touring the entire facility from where the children enter the building at the sally port, to processing, to temporary holding, to courtrooms, meeting rooms, visitation rooms, assembly space, sleeping area/day rooms, etc., to gauge a child's perspective when entering the facility.

While we were touring and explaining to various stakeholders, what we would be doing to add more color to the facility, more inspirational texts on the walls, more art, we were given feedback. Some people asked why we would want to make the Juvenile Center a more colorful and youth-oriented environment, "... it should be a place children don't want to come, not be comfortable, so that they would not have a desire to return ... this is not supposed to be fun ..."

When faced with these types of statements, I would recall what I had heard from the JJC, the youth who are the voice for those detained.

The JJC reminded us of basic humanity through their care and concern for other children whose experiences resulted in JTDC residency. They decided to do what society has not, extend a hand to their counterparts. The children aged 10-18, shackled at times, who sometimes peer, one eye at a time from a small glass window in their cell doors. These are children who carry the burden for poor decision making and bad behavior of adults, whether parents, community leaders, or elected/appointed officials. Are underperforming schools their fault? Is homelessness, insufficient healthcare, violence and post-traumatic disorders from exposure to violence their fault? Is abuse and unsafe communities their fault?

Being hyper-aware and fearful day in and day out is the reality of life for many detained youth. They have a never-let-your-guard-down mentality. It's alleged some of these youth have committed adult crimes. Many underserved communities force children to become adults before their time.

The youth at JTDC are children, first and foremost. Children who may never have had a chance to be children. Implicit bias and/or discrimination has plagued them from their early years. Mischief in one child is considered delinquency in another. A slap on the wrist for one results in detention for another. These are the things the JJC takes into consideration when administering Ubuntu, a Bantu term I learned for "Human Kindness."

The JJC is composed of children from various ethnic backgrounds and cultures who willingly focus on justice involved youth, the majority of whom, are African American. Such focus is admirable and important to understanding the problem of their contemporaries who are being detained at the JTDC. I visited South Africa in June 2015 as part of a leadership program and at the entrance of the Johannesburg jail where Nelson Mandela was held reads, "It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails."

The DFM staff and I understood and internalized the JJC's desire to inspire the children and help provide a more rehabilitative, not punitive, environment. The institutional appearance of the JTDC facility is clearly not a deterrent to recidivism, one stakeholder suggested.

The Superintendent of the JTDC, Leonard Dixon, is a charismatic leader who genuinely cares about the detained youth and has also taken to adding color in every living unit. DFM works closely with Mr. Dixon, who includes the children in the color selections as a way to reinforce resilience through environmental change.

We are thankful to have had the opportunity to collaborate with and be inspired by the JJC and hope to have further interaction with the Mikva Challenge program. DFM will be implementing many of the JJC's recommendations to improve the JTDC environment. Some have already started, such as adding color to the soundproofing in the courtrooms, hanging inspirational artwork, repainting living units, repainting the ceiling in visitation room to add color, installing monitors to loop information, and adding painted/sealed game boards to tables.

In the Cook County Department of Facilities Management, color vibrancy, inspiration, and rehabilitation will be incorporated in the process of physical plant maintenance, aesthetics, and upgrades for the JTDC going forward, due to the JJC being the stage and voice of the detained youth. It is our hope that a more enlightened physical environment will lead to increased youth enlightenment and positive stimulation.

Sincerely,

Bilqis Jacobs-El
Director
Facilities Management