Mental Health & Juvenile Justice - What do you need to know?

- Mental health issues in the Juvenile Justice system are of significant concern. On any given day, nearly 87,000 juvenile offenders are not living in their homes but are held in residential placement.¹

- In a study done by the National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice (NCMHJJ) and the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators (CJCA) it was indicated that 70.4% of youth in the Juvenile Justice system meet criteria for at least one Mental Health disorder. ²

- In a report by the Justice Policy Institute, one psychologist found that for one-third of incarcerated youth diagnosed with depression, the onset of the depression occurred after they began their incarceration, and another suggests that poor mental health, and the conditions of confinement together conspire to make it more likely that incarcerated teens will engage in suicide and self-harm.³ Far from receiving effective treatment, young people with behavioral health problems simply get worse in detention, not better.

- These issues are devastating to all populations but especially to minority groups. African-Americans comprise 15.4% of the general population under age 18, yet make up 29% of juvenile cases formally processed through the juvenile court system and 38% of youth detained prior to trial. Additionally African American youth are 1.4 times more likely to be detained than their white peers⁴

- However there is still hope, community based therapeutic services have shown promising benefits. Several studies have shown that youth who are incarcerated are more likely to recidivate than youth who are supervised in a community-based setting, or not detained at all.⁵

- Not only do community-based services provide better outcomes, they also cost less. In a GAO report to Congress, both reentry and substance abuse experts cited studies indicating that cognitive behavioral therapy and family therapy programs are cost beneficial.⁶ In fact the Washington State Institutes for Public Policy found that for every dollar spent on county juvenile detention systems, $1.98 of “benefits” in terms of reduced crime and costs of crime to taxpayers was achieved. By sharp contrast, diversion and mentoring programs produced $3.36 of benefits for every dollar spent, aggression replacement training produced $10 and multi-systemic therapy produced $13⁷

What can you do?

- Encourage your state, local and federal legislators to support alternatives to detention.
- Educate your peers and community on the issues of mental health in the Juvenile Justice system.
- Mentor a youth!