**Brief history and impact of a federal “Transitional Administrator” over juvenile detention in Cook County, IL**

**MAY 19, 2022**

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"*The Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center has spiraled into a wasteful, disorganized, abusive cesspool.” Chicago Tribune Editorial, September 7, 2005."*[1](https://www.vitalcitynyc.org/articles/federal-transitional-administrator-juvenile-detention-cook-county#note1)

“*[The Temporary Administrator did an] “extraordinary job…(he) cleaned house: He fired incompetent and abusive staff members, hired hundreds of skilled professionals and fought unions that tried to block his changes. He instituted a zero-tolerance policy for abuse and tried to reunite more kids with their families to reduce the center's population. The federal court backed him up along the way.” Chicago Tribune Editorial, June 9, 2014*

This brief summary of outcomes from the federal court assuming operational authority of the Cook County, IL Juvenile Temporary Detention Center [JTDC] is from *Recalibrating Juvenile Detention: Lessons Learned from the Court-Ordered Reform of the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center*, David W. Roush (2019).

*Recalibrating Juvenile Detention* chronicles lessons learned from the 2007-2015 assumption of operational authority by the federal court of the juvenile detention facility in Chicago, a facility whose history dates back to the founding of the world’s first juvenile court there in 1899. This followed years of litigation by, and the signing of, a 2002 Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the ACLU over unconstitutional conditions of confinement at the JTDC. Many of the circumstances in Chicago mirror those present in NYC jails during the *Nunez* litigation.

The federal court monitor described the County’s conundrum prior to the receivership as County leaders having been handed a recipe by world renowned chefs who had been assembled to serve as experts and advisors on the case since entering into the MOA (like NYC’s “Consent Decree” in *Nunez v. City of New York, et al.*) in 2002. Roush wrote that the federal monitor had concluded that Cook County had “all the necessary ingredients (highest quality, unlimited quantity).” After going through seven superintendents from 2000-2006, what the County needed was an “artisan” to create its meal, with sufficient authority.

On May 29, 2007, ACLU Attorney Ben Wolf filed a motion to place the department into receivership on behalf of “Next Friend” Tom Geraghty.[2](https://www.vitalcitynyc.org/articles/federal-transitional-administrator-juvenile-detention-cook-county#note2) Geraghty had found that, after more than four years of monitoring, the Center was still plagued by “(a) an alarming risk of suicide and…[inadequate] mental health services; (b) a climate of fear…;  (c) inadequate medical services; (d) a culture of chaos and incompetence…; (e) a refusal to implement generally accepted systems of management…thereby preventing even minimal compliance with this Court’s orders.” Geraghty concluded that the County’s lack of compliance with court-ordered remedies had “utterly failed his charges.”

Importantly, while the TA was required to “exercise authority consistent with the laws, policies and regulations of Cook County and the State of Illinois,” whenever those laws or regulations interfered with running a safe and constitutional facility, the TA could petition the court to waive them.

On August 14, 2007, the ACLU withdrew its motion to appoint a receiver when the County agreed for the federal judge in the case to issue an *Order Appointing a Transitional Administrator*(TA)*.*The TA, national expert Earl Dunlap, was appointed by and answerable to the federal judge, and had receiver-like powers to run the department in a streamlined fashion, including powers to: “(a) operate all aspects of the JTDC; (b) establish a budget for JTDC functions; (c) undertake reasonable allocations of funding; (d) negotiate new contracts or renegotiate existing contracts; (e) retain consultants; (f) restructure and reorganize [the JTDC]…,” among other powers. Importantly, while the TA was required to “exercise authority consistent with the laws, policies, and regulations of Cook County and the State of Illinois,” whenever those laws or regulations interfered with running a safe and constitutional facility, the TA could petition the court to waive them.

Some tangible reforms enacted under the receivership include: the introduction of a Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) approach (then a novel practice – now more common) to working with detained young people; raising the qualifications of staff by increasing pre-employment education and experience; developing a comprehensive training curriculum; strengthening staff retention; contracting with an outside human resources firm; appointing an education overseer; enhancing education of special needs students; increasing sensitivity to LGBTQ youth; providing adequate food, housing, and clothing; improving access to attorneys; increasing programming availability; and limiting TV time, among others.

Findings validate an innovative model of institutional reform utilizing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, yielding significant 22% reductions in recidivism...

*Recalibrating Juvenile Detention* includes a summary of gold standard research by the University of Chicago’s Crime Lab on recidivism and an analysis of institutional conditions. Findings validate an innovative model of institutional reform utilizing CBT (essentially, helping young people learn to stop and think before they act), yielding significant 22% reductions in recidivism as measured by returns to detention over an 18-month period. Further, JTDC conditions were compared to a national database of juvenile detention facilities on 13 measures of Safety and Order like injuries to youth by staff and other youth, use of isolation and mechanical restraints, and suicide prevention screening. From 2012 (when all JTDC youth began receiving CBT) to 2015 (when the federal court returned control of JTDC to the County), every JTDC subscore was statistically significantly better than the national average.

While no two systems are alike, the successful Transitional Administrator over Chicago’s juvenile detention facility offers a promising case study for improving conditions in systems mired in years of litigation and court monitoring without any improvement from dangerous and unconstitutional conditions of confinement.

*Authored by Vincent Schiraldi, Columbia Justice Lab/School of Social Work, for a forum entitled “Fixing New York City’s Jails: A Federal Receiver?” May 14, 2022.*

1. The Tribune’s June 9, 2014 Editorial described conditions in the detention facility prior to the Transitional Administrator as a “patronage haven” for the County Board President with a “dangerous, filthy environment” where young people were mentally and physically abused.

2. “Next Friends” are sometimes appointed in cases where the plaintiffs’ class is considered to be unable to fully speak for themselves as in the case of juveniles or developmentally disabled people. Geraghty is a well-respected professor at the Northwestern School of Law. Both Wolf and Geraghty will be speaking at the Receivership Forum on 5/19, along with the Deputy Temporary Administrator (Teresa Abreu) and the State’s Attorney who defended the County – John Curran – who is now a Republican State Senator in Illinois.