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## **Study: Lawyers who represent children are undertrained**

PORTLAND, Maine - Maine teenagers in trouble with the law are committed to detention facilities more often than necessary and don't receive the services they need to straighten out their lives, according to a study released Wednesday.

The study also said that the lawyers who represent Maine children in courtrooms are underpaid and undertrained, and that the lack of community-based shelters gives judges few alternatives to locking kids up.

The study was sponsored by the New England Juvenile Defender Center and the American Bar Association, which sent defense lawyers from five states into Maine courtrooms.

"Kids run the risk of being overpunished," said Lisa Thureau-Gray, executive director of the New England Juvenile Defender Center. "We are also wasting court resources when we don't do it right the first time."

Maine does not have a juvenile court system, and instead assigns juvenile cases to the district court system, which also handles adult cases. As a result, there are few lawyers, and no judges, who focus solely on juvenile justice, and that causes problems, the study concludes.

The state also does not have a public defender program. Rather, it provides free legal defense for people who cannot afford lawyers through a system of court appointments to private attorneys.

Edwin Chester, a Portland lawyer who does most of his work in the juvenile court system, said attorneys in Maine lack training in dealing with juveniles. He said representing children is different from working with adults because children can't participate in their own defense the way adults can, and they often don't trust strangers, even when they claim they want to help.

Chester is now representing a former Maine Youth Center resident who is suing state officials on claims he suffers from permanent mental disorders as a result of long periods of isolation and restraint while at the detention center.

Chester said, and the report concurred, that payment is also an issue. The state is required to provide a lawyer for a juvenile accused of a crime, but pays only \$50 an hour, to a maximum of \$350 per case.

"This is important work, and if you want it done well you need to compensate people for the work that they do," Chester said.

Vendean Vafiades, chief justice of Maine's District Court, said the study identifies serious problems within Maine's juvenile justice system.

“I do support the conclusion that juvenile defense is inconsistent in terms of availability and quality,” she said. “This is really an important message.”

The Maine Bar Association in January will devote a day of its winter meeting to juvenile justice training for the first time. This week, Maine’s district court judges are conducting their own training on juvenile justice, said Vafiades.

Well prepared defense lawyers help judges make better decisions and save the system money, Vafiades said.