



## Pro Bono and Community Efforts

### *ADVOCATING COMMUNITY-BASED ALTERNATIVES FOR AT-RISK YOUTH*

*National Network for Youth*

The National Network for Youth (NN4Y) is a small but extraordinary group of professionals who are dedicated to a compelling issue that rarely makes the news – the need to provide shelter, food, and counseling to the thousands of young people who run away from or are chased out of their family homes and end up on the streets every year.

Rather than simply placing these at-risk young people in the criminal justice system where they accrue arrest records and, as a result, often are placed in secure detention with offenders guilty of far more serious crimes, NN4Y's experience demonstrates that the availability of various community-based services can be far more effective in helping these children and teens resolve their situations and stay out of trouble.

However, under the current construction of the Juvenile Justice Act, states may place status offenders (e.g., runaways, truants, or curfew violators) in secure detention if the youths were in violation of a valid court order (this is referred to as the "VCO exception").

With the Juvenile Justice Act up for reauthorization in 2008, NN4Y saw the opportunity to eliminate the VCO exception and require states to adopt community-based alternatives for these youths. Van Ness Feldman helped NN4Y with its Congressional advocacy efforts by analyzing the laws of all 50 states (and D.C.) to determine which states use the VCO exception. This analysis served as the basis for NN4Y's outreach to legislators.

In August of 2008, the Senate Judiciary Committee held a markup on the Juvenile Protection Act reauthorization bill and passed an amendment on an 11 to 7 vote to eliminate the VCO exception, a huge victory for NN4Y.

According to the Director of Public Policy at NN4Y, this was an extremely controversial issue for the Committee and the material VNF prepared was instrumental in producing the 11 votes in support of the amendment.

*(Above image dramatized - does not portray client)*