

States of the Union

TRACKING OUR TROUBLED CHILDREN

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

SATURDAY NIGHTS are the hardest. "The kids get spastic on weekends," a caseworker explains. "They're really tough to keep track of."

I am visiting an "outreach and tracking center" near downtown Springfield, Massachusetts. The little house belongs to the KEY Program, a statewide non-profit group formed 15 years ago, after the state shut down all five of its big gray reformatories. The idea back then was to "deinstitutionalize" the kids, to get them out from behind bars and into small, home-based programs, where intensive care might make them whole.

By deinstitutional standards, KEY is no puny enterprise. It receives over \$8 million a year from the state, and \$4.3 million of that comes from the Department of Youth Services (DYS), the agency entrusted with punishing and reclaiming delinquent children. Many of those children are halfway to freedom: They are out of detention but still in official custody.

About half of KEY's annual budget goes into "tracking"—a herculean and often thankless task that the organization's brochure describes in the blandest of terms: "Clients are monitored through a prearranged schedule in order that the staff knows their activities and whereabouts, both day and night."

Wesley Cotter, KEY's regional director in central Massachusetts, puts it another way. "Most of these kids," he says, "are going to outgrow their delinquency. In the meantime it's up to us to keep them out of trouble, to get them through adolescence in one piece. We have to watch them not just once a week or even once a day, but *all the time*."

There is yet another way to describe the job caseworkers at KEY are asked to perform: They must become surrogate parents. Indeed, the responsibilities they assume—keeping track of kids around the clock—are ones that most parents would consider all in a night's work. The big difference is in the number of kids who need watching, and in their erratic histories.

Checking the whereabouts of some 70 adolescents, each one in trouble with the courts, is the name of the game here at the center in Springfield. It is 5 P.M. and the staff doesn't yet know where its children are. Four young caseworkers and two supervisors sit at a table examining tonight's roster. The sheets display last names only—Rivera, Buckley, Hammer, Pebley—but the caseworkers recognize them all on a first-name basis.

Where will Ben be tonight? "Ben better be home. He's grounded this week-

end; he skipped school Thursday and Friday." How about Casey? "Casey's upstairs. He got in a fight with his mom so I brought him back for the night." There are several beds upstairs for kids who need a night or two away from home. Provision of overnight care and counseling is called "Tracking Plus."

The recitation continues: Collin "went to the orthodontist—he broke his braces." Tiajuana is going to a dance: "She's supposed to be in by 10." Ronnie "is a real pain in the ass—wants rides everywhere." Joanna "promised to be home before 8. If she gives her mother a hard time let her have it, 'cause I already talked to her about that." Lonnie's working tonight at Stop & Shop. "He gets out at 9 and he's supposed to go straight home. No hanging around Hamburger Heaven."

By 6:15 the rundown is finished. In theory, every youth has been accounted for. Now comes the hard part—making sure the kids are where they're supposed to be. The caseworkers disperse. They will be driving around Springfield till the wee hours of the morning, searching for kids on their lists, hoping there will be no big surprises.

"I got a surprise a few weeks ago," one of the caseworkers, Ellen Gallman, says on our way to the parking lot. "There was this 15-year-old who'd been convicted of armed robbery—not one of your easier kids. He wasn't home when he was supposed to be, so I went to look for him. I found him, too. He was driving a stolen auto.

"We stared at each other through our car windows. Then I got out and called the police. When something like that happens, you have to call the police right away. Anyway, they arrested him later that night and handcuffed him. But while they were all standing around, the kid ran into the woods and vanished.

"That's one that literally got away from us. We haven't seen him since. But one of these days I'm sure he'll show up again in the neighborhood. The thing about these kids is they always come home."

Ellen will be my guide tonight. Like her fellow caseworkers, she is in her mid-twenties and full of energy. In 16

months on the job Ellen has logged 34,000 miles. Tonight, she says, "we're going to see about 20 kids. They're all over town. One or two live way out in the boonies."

We go first to a black neighborhood, corner of Sycamore and Acorn. Ellen parks near a tavern with a United Way sign out front—"We're All In This Together"—and runs to the house next-door. "Two teenage kids living here with foster parents," she explains as she runs. "Hurry up! Time's a-wasting."

The foster mother is a large woman wearing a stained apron. "Buddy," she calls, "the KEY people wanna talk to you." Buddy comes downstairs. He informs Ellen that his roommate William isn't there. "He come home and he go out."

"If he comes back," says Ellen, "tell him I want to see him pronto. He wasn't supposed to go out tonight. He's *grounded*."

We rush back to the car. There are quite a few more kids to visit in the neighborhood and we spend the next hour tracking them. They turn out to be all present and accounted for, all at home, all in front of TV sets. Salvia, who is 14 years old and pregnant, is sixth on our list. She is watching a *Dallas* rerun. "How you feeling?" Ellen asks her. Salvia doesn't look up. "Bored," she says. "Real bored."

It's past eight now, and dark. Ellen doesn't want to leave the neighborhood until she's found William. "He's a pretty good kid," she says, "but he gets into a lot of fights. He's on probation for assault and battery. Just another brawl in a bar." She drives back to Acorn Street and slowly cruises the block. "We're looking for little kids to ask, because little kids don't know enough to lie for somebody." In the next block she finds four small boys bouncing on a torn mattress someone has dumped near curbside.

Ellen gets out of the car. Kneeling on the mattress, she asks, "Do any of you know Willie Rice? Have you seen him tonight?" "Nope," they answer—then one changes his mind. "I seen him," he tells Ellen. "He in a house some place."

We drive to another neighborhood, where the houses are bigger and stand

further apart. "You're going to meet Benjamin," Ellen announces. "I saw him yesterday morning. I see Benjamin just about *every* morning, 'cause he's got a truancy problem. He'd rather sleep in than go to school, so I roust him out of bed at 7, rain or shine. His mother is used to me. She just opens the door and points me toward Benjamin's bedroom."

Benjamin is supposed to be doing homework tonight. There's an algebra book lying on the kitchen table but it's closed. Benjamin is in the living room watching TV. "Did you do your homework yet?" asks Ellen. Benjamin says "Uh huh."

"Does that mean yes or no?"

"It means sort of." They both laugh.

We drive to the suburbs, pulling up in front of the Stop & Shop supermarket where Lonnie is supposed to be bagging groceries. (Saturday's child works for a living.) But Lonnie, we learn, is not there. "He left early tonight," the manager tells us. "Said he had to get home for something."

"Oh, oh," Ellen mutters. "I smell trouble."

ON OUR WAY to "the boonies" Ellen talks about her job. "I never thought I could work so hard," she says, "but I love it. The kids can drive you nuts, of course. We make them account for every moment of their lives. Sometimes I see the same kid four different times in one day. I get him up in the morning. I take him to his job after school. I take him home after work. And then I make sure he gets to bed by curfew time, which on school nights is 10 o'clock. Some kids resent all that supervision, especially at first. Later they begin to understand that if they live up to their contracts, they get rewarded. The ultimate reward is that we get off their backs."

She says this weekend of work is typical of all her weekends. "I got only four hours of sleep last night and I'll probably get about the same tonight. Sunday mornings the caseworkers don't have to come in till 10. We do special things with the kids on Sundays—take them to museums or to the arcade, or play football with them, things like that. It's part

of the give-and-take: The kids who have misbehaved don't get to go on these weekly outings."

She is interrupted by the sound of her beeper. "That means somebody has called the office and left a message for me. I have to find a phone." She finds one at an Exxon station. "It was Lonnie," she says when she comes back. "He's in deep trouble. Called to say he'd be home late because he had to work overtime at Stop & Shop. Truth is not Lonnie's strong suit."

Around 10:30 we stop on a dark country road across from a little shack without lights. We get out and climb the rickety porch. Ellen finds a note wedged in the door. It says, "Gone to see movie. Hello Again. Rick." "That's OK," she says, "if he really went to a movie. Tomorrow I'll ask him to tell me the plot."

We seem to have finished our Saturday night tracking now, except for a couple of loose ends named Lonnie and William. So back we go to find them. At Lonnie's house no one answers the doorbell that Ellen keeps leaning on. "Aren't you afraid of waking up the family?" I ask.

"That's what I *want*," she says. "The family is supposed to care enough to answer the bell."

I want to know what Ellen will do with Lonnie when she finds him. She is not entirely sure. "Probably I'll take him back to the office," she says, "and make him stay the night. Tomorrow maybe I'll tell him to write an essay for me, on a subject like 'Why It Doesn't Pay to Lie.' Or I may have him write the same thing 50 times in a notebook such as: 'I will not forget to leave a message, I will not forget to leave a message....' We make a lot of writing assignments like that. They're called 'Consequences.'"

At William's place, the foster mother is still in her apron and still ignorant of William's whereabouts. But now Buddy is missing, too. "He left a long time ago. Didn't say where he was going."

"I'll try again in an hour or two," Ellen tells her. "They'll have to come home sooner or later."

"That's right," the woman agrees. "They always do come back. They good boys."