

To the jury

They are mostly African-American kids, forgotten and discarded — state wards who have suffered abuse and neglect. Illinois officials send them by the thousands to live in residential treatment centers promising skilled therapy and close supervision.

These taxpayer-financed institutions boast of restoring and even saving young lives. But the horrific conditions inside were hidden from the public and even many government regulators until a yearlong Chicago Tribune investigation used confidential documents and sensitive interviews with youths to pierce the secrecy that surrounds the most troubled facilities.

Hundreds of Illinois wards are assaulted and raped by their peers each year as authorities fail to act on reports of harm and continue sending waves of youths to the most violent facilities, the Tribune's "Harsh Treatment" investigation found.

Prostitution becomes a fact of life at facilities where experienced residents introduce others to pimps, escort websites and street corners. Youths with histories of sexual abuse are exploited by peers and even by their adult caregivers. And thousands of kids flee to the streets, where some sell drugs and sex to survive and others break into homes and mug passers-by. Dozens have never been found.

Many of these underprivileged youths are shuttled for years from one grim institution to another before emerging more damaged than when they went in.

Even before the third installment of this five-part series had been published in December, officials across the state were taking immediate steps to protect wards housed in the state's 50 facilities and begin a systematic overhaul of Illinois' mental health programs in ways that could better the lives of thousands of children.

Among those actions: increased monitoring and unannounced inspections; intake holds on five of the most troubled institutions and removal of wards from one; revised procedures for investigating allegations of sexual abuse or assault in facilities; training for facility staff and youths on human trafficking; and new requirements that facilities alert state authorities frequently about staffing shortages, inappropriate staff conduct, physical or sexual assault of youths, and runaway incidents.

The state General Assembly's first action of the new year was to hold a special House-Senate hearing in response to the Tribune series. In her testimony, the director of the state Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) called the newspaper's findings "both appalling and unacceptable," and announced that she had been asked to step down from her post.

State lawmakers immediately began introducing reform bills, and they created a bipartisan standing subcommittee to revamp Illinois' tattered system for serving youths who have suffered trauma and developed mental health problems. Outgoing Gov. Pat Quinn, a Democrat, tasked a new state panel with overseeing DCFS's corrective actions. His successor, Republican Bruce Rauner, pledged a thorough review of child welfare in Illinois, declaring: "The recent reports are outrageous. ... We need to fundamentally reassess the way we approach child and family services in Illinois."

Under intense scrutiny from the state brought on by the Tribune series, Rock River Academy — one of the most violence-plagued facilities in the state — announced it would shut down.

In Washington, meanwhile, Justice Department lawyers are exploring whether to intervene over possible civil rights violations.

Sen. Dick Durbin, an Illinois Democrat, urged Justice's Civil Rights Division to "do all it can within its authority to investigate these abuses and ensure that the constitutional and civil rights of these children are protected." And Sen. Mark Kirk, an

Illinois Republican, called for an immediate investigation by the inspector general of the Department of Health and Human Services and asked Medicaid officials to consider suspending unsafe and poorly run facilities from the federal health care program.

Without the Tribune's digging, the public and even top government officials would have remained oblivious to the scope and intensity of abuse suffered by youths inside these facilities. Authorities responded to information requests by blacking out or withholding basic records of harm to young residents. Staff at troubled facilities kept silent as administrators closed ranks.

Illinois makes it a potential crime to divulge child welfare, medical or juvenile court files. But reporters David Jackson, Gary Marx and Duaa Eldeib gained the trust of attorneys, youth workers, medical professionals and others who put their careers on the line to share critical information. The reporters gathered confidential records that included more than 10,000 pages of the Unusual Incident Reports facilities must submit whenever a youth is injured or put in jeopardy.

They successfully petitioned the Cook County juvenile court for access to the delinquency files of more than 100 residents. Through relentless FOIA appeals, they pried free police and state monitoring reports on violent incidents inside the facilities.

In addition, they compiled internal state data on discharge outcomes as well as key events like runaways, assaults and sexual abuse. Previously unpublished and stunning in themselves, those data revealed 428 reports of sexual assault or abuse at facilities across the state over a three-year period, 1,052 physical assaults and 29,425 runaways.

To get beyond Illinois and investigate the roughly 500 residential centers across the country, Jackson launched an 18-month-long collaboration with Northwestern University's Medill Watchdog program, teaching 51 student interns how to obtain and analyze police and state monitoring reports. This effort yielded more than 66,000 pages of records, an unprecedented cache of documents revealing how facilities in other states also suffer from inadequate staffing, abuse and violence.

The records told part of the story. But it was when reporters began interviewing former residents that the true horror and the human cost became clear. Through painstaking street-level journalism, Jackson, Marx and Eldeib tracked down dozens of Illinois runaways and former facility residents. In one example, they got powerful on-camera interviews with both a pimp who explained how he recruited residential center runaways and one of the youths he prostituted.

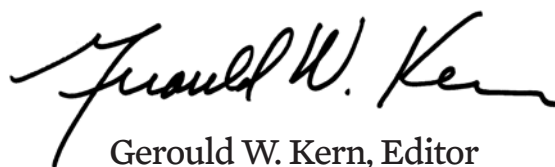
From the first encounters, reporters gave youths the power to decide whether to share their accounts and multiple opportunities to change their minds and withdraw from the project. Even when young people were eager to cooperate, reporters and editors assessed whether telling an individual's story could do him or her harm.

Time and again, these young people spoke of wanting their stories to be heard, of wanting to herald change. And that is exactly what they did.

"Nobody but u guys listened to us," Angelique Borden wrote on Facebook. Added MsWhitney Holt: "Finally we are being heard!!! ... I really hope we helped them see the flaws in the system."

For exposing those flaws, spurring tangible reforms that have already improved safety for children and catalyzing a broader effort to lift the lives of disadvantaged youths, we nominate Jackson, Marx and Eldeib for the Pulitzer Prize in investigative reporting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gerould W. Kern". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Gerould W. Kern, Editor