

By Frank Boyett for theGleaner.com

George Timberlake retired five years ago as an Illinois judge, and now he's convinced he was doing it all wrong.

"I put kids in jail at a higher rate than almost anybody," he told the Henderson Rotary Club on Thursday. "I thought that was the right way to do things."

But when he "turned around and looked at what I had been doing," he said, he came to the conclusion that "we were just greasing the skids" for youngsters' path downhill to adult prison.

When it comes to kids, he said, "jail doesn't help. There is no evidence that ... incarceration changes behavior. None." The key instead, he said, is to evaluate the kid's risk of fleeing the jurisdiction or not appearing in court when sentencing jail time.

Timberlake is now chairman of the Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission, and as such he is helping lead the nation out of the dark ages of juvenile justice. The "Redeploy Illinois" program hands out state money to communities who are able to reduce their number of incarcerated juveniles.

"You solve their problems, you link them with services, and you have a dollar bill that pays for it. That works. It makes you safer, it saves more tax dollars and it's a better outcome for kids."

Redeploy Illinois does not shy away from such touchy subjects as sex and race. Illinois is dealing with "what nobody wants to talk about," which are juvenile sex offenders. Nobody wants their kid in the same room with one, he said, but they "are not like adult sex offenders" because the recidivism percentage rate "is in the single digits." Those kids can be saved, he stressed.

And when visiting any prison, he said, "you walk in the door and the only white faces are the guards. If you're not talking about race, you're not talking about justice. The research shows that white people commit crimes at the same rate as black people. Then how is it that black people are the only ones in prison?"

The key to a viable juvenile justice program are community based services that meet the needs of troubled kids without putting them in jail and exposing them to the influence of hardened criminals. Jailing status offenders such as truants, curfew violators or underage drinkers makes absolutely no sense, he said.

"You have to reject the idea that court is the treatment provider of first resort. When someone comes to the justice system that ought to be the last resort. It doesn't work and it's a waste of your money."

Timberlake ticked off three reasons for alternatives to jail for juveniles. Increase public safety: "Don't create more crime and more criminals." Use resources wisely: Incarceration "costs an enormous amount of money.

"And, most importantly, do the right thing. Create positive outcomes with kids by what you do to them. When are we going to do that as a nation?"