



Contact: Danielle Lipow, 334-956-8336

**For Immediate Release
June 12, 2008**

Alabama Youth Justice Coalition Lauds Legislative Triumph and Collaborative Juvenile Justice System Reform Efforts

A response to the 2008 Kids Count Essay

Montgomery, AL--Alabama's remarkable commitment to juvenile justice reform is protecting community safety, improving life outcomes for at-risk children—and affirming the themes of the 2008 Kids Count Essay “A Road Map for Juvenile Justice Reform.” The Essay calls for juvenile justice policy that is grounded in best practices and data proving what works to help at-risk youth flourish and develop into productive, law-abiding adults. Specifically, the Essay documents a growing body of research showing that incarceration is the most expensive and least effective way to reduce juvenile crime.

As the Essay notes, “studies routinely show that 50 to 80 percent of youth released from juvenile correctional facilities are rearrested within 2 to 3 years—even those who were not serious offenders prior to their commitment.” Family-focused, community-based sanctions are not only less expensive than institutions, they are also much more effective in protecting our communities and helping children turn their lives around. This is a critical lesson for Alabama, where juvenile prisons are flooded with low risk youth who pose no threat to public safety. Last year, more than 77% of the children admitted to the Alabama Department of Youth Services were locked up for non-violent misbehavior like shoplifting and disorderly conduct. Over 100 children were locked up for non-criminal conduct like truancy or disobeying a parent.

The Kids Count Essay is released on the heels of the Alabama legislative session, during which lawmakers enacted the Alabama Juvenile Justice Act of 2008 – a landmark piece of legislation that was championed by Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb and signed by Governor Riley in May. The Juvenile Justice Act resulted from unprecedented collaboration between the legislative, executive and judicial branches. Among other measures, the law ensures that, in most circumstances, no youth ends up behind bars for non-criminal misbehavior. The new law also prohibits the incarceration of children under the age of 13, unless charged with a serious offense, and protects children's rights throughout the juvenile court process.

Although the Kids Count Data Book shows as Alabama as one of the lowest ranked states in the country for overall child well-being, there is plenty of good news as well. Alabama is becoming a leader in the national movement to make juvenile justice systems accountable to taxpayers, to communities, and to children. The Juvenile Justice Act is just one of several ways that state leaders have proven their commitment to building an effective, fair and results-oriented juvenile justice system. At the invitation of Governor Riley and DYS Director Walter Wood, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Strategic Consulting Group has been working to design and implement a network of alternative sanctions for at-risk youth that are more effective and

less expensive than incarceration. Thanks to the leadership and vision of Chief Justice Cobb and juvenile judges throughout the state, four of Alabama's largest counties have engaged with the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), another program of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, to reduce the unnecessary detention of children and to ensure that local juvenile justice practices are fiscally solid.

The Alabama Youth Justice Coalition congratulates the government officials in every branch who have taken such a strong stand for the wellbeing of our children and the safety of our communities. We will all benefit from their sustained and ongoing commitment to Alabama's most precious resource – our children.

##

About the Alabama Youth Justice Coalition

The Alabama Youth Justice Coalition ("AYJC") was convened in 2005 to reduce juvenile crime, ensure that taxpayer money is spent wisely, empower families and communities, and provide youth with the tools and opportunities they need to become and remain healthy, responsible, productive adults. The Coalition is committed to working collaboratively with the legislature, child-serving agencies, juvenile and family courts, youth, families, and communities to build a stronger and safer Alabama for our children.