

## **Leonard Dixon**

**President – National Juvenile Detention Association (NJDA)**

**2004-2006**

**2016-2018**



***Rep. John Lewis, SC visited the Cook County  
Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, May 30,  
2018***

Leonard Dixon has held every position in juvenile justice, including direct care staff, facility administrator, consultant, monitor, state director and currently the facility superintendent of the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, the largest juvenile detention facility in the country. Mr. Dixon views all of these experiences as valuable, especially, he noted, the experience of being a political appointee that came with the experience and professional

understanding to do the job. Mr. Dixon's career path has allowed him to contribute to juvenile justice systems in Florida, Michigan and Illinois.

While in Florida, Mr. Dixon began searching for an organization that could not only validate the work they were doing in the facility, but could also make them better. He knew that other professions had this type of organization, so he figured that juvenile justice must have also. This initially brought him to the National Juvenile Detention Association. Then, when he moved to Michigan, he found that NJDA had a much larger presence in Michigan and a much more active state association and Michigan members tied to both the state and national organizations. Mr. Dixon continued his involvement.

During his presidency, Mr. Dixon sought to advocate for good juvenile detention practices and to "put a face" on juvenile detention – that primarily of kids of color. Mr. Dixon was the first president of color for the NJDA and he wanted to actively promote not just membership amongst people of color, but also elevate and advance those of color into leadership positions.

Mr. Dixon identified four key issues that were percolating on the national scene during his presidency through which NJDA contributed to the advancement of the field. These issues included:

1. PREA and the development of a national set of standard for the elimination of sexual misconduct in juvenile facilities
2. Mental health services
3. Adequately trained staff – OJJDP continued to fund the development of training curricula and the provision of training and technical assistance to facilities
4. Development of Position Statements specifically in the areas of medical, mental health, and educational services

Since his presidency, Mr. Dixon noted advancements driven by research in several areas. He stated that because of better research we are more informed about confinement issues, medical and mental health issues, specifically the effects of trauma. Disproportionate Minority Contact/Confinement (DMC) is still one of the big issues, but progress has been made. Mr. Dixon stated that the field is also making progress in that it is moving away from privatizing juvenile justice. He stated that we should be taking the "money" out of juvenile justice. Privatizing corrections led us to passing laws to make sure people are incarcerated, i.e. 3-strikes, low level drug offenders in prison, etc. only to make money. Mr. Dixon went on to say that litigation has had both a positive and negative effect on juvenile justice. Litigation is bad when it is based on frivolous lawsuits, however can be good when it actually is the impetus for correcting and improving inadequate and unlawful conditions of confinement.

As it looks to the future, NJDA/NPJS needs to see kids as kids and kids as human beings. It has to work to make institutions better. This could start with doing better at seeing juvenile justice as a profession. Mr. Dixon provided an interesting scenario regarding the perception of the professionalism of the field. He stated, "You don't find the superintendent of a detention center the next day being the superintendent of schools, the chief of police, or the warden of the jail. Why is it possible that this scenario in reverse is probable and even likely to happen?" As the organization representing the staff in facilities, NJDA/NPJS needs to state unequivocally that there is a certain level of professionalism and skill needed to run a facility and to deal with life and death situations every day. As an organization, we have to educate people on what juvenile detention is. We don't fix kids, we may identify their problems, but we only have them for a short time and then they go back to the same environment that hasn't been fixed. People need to know what our purpose really is.