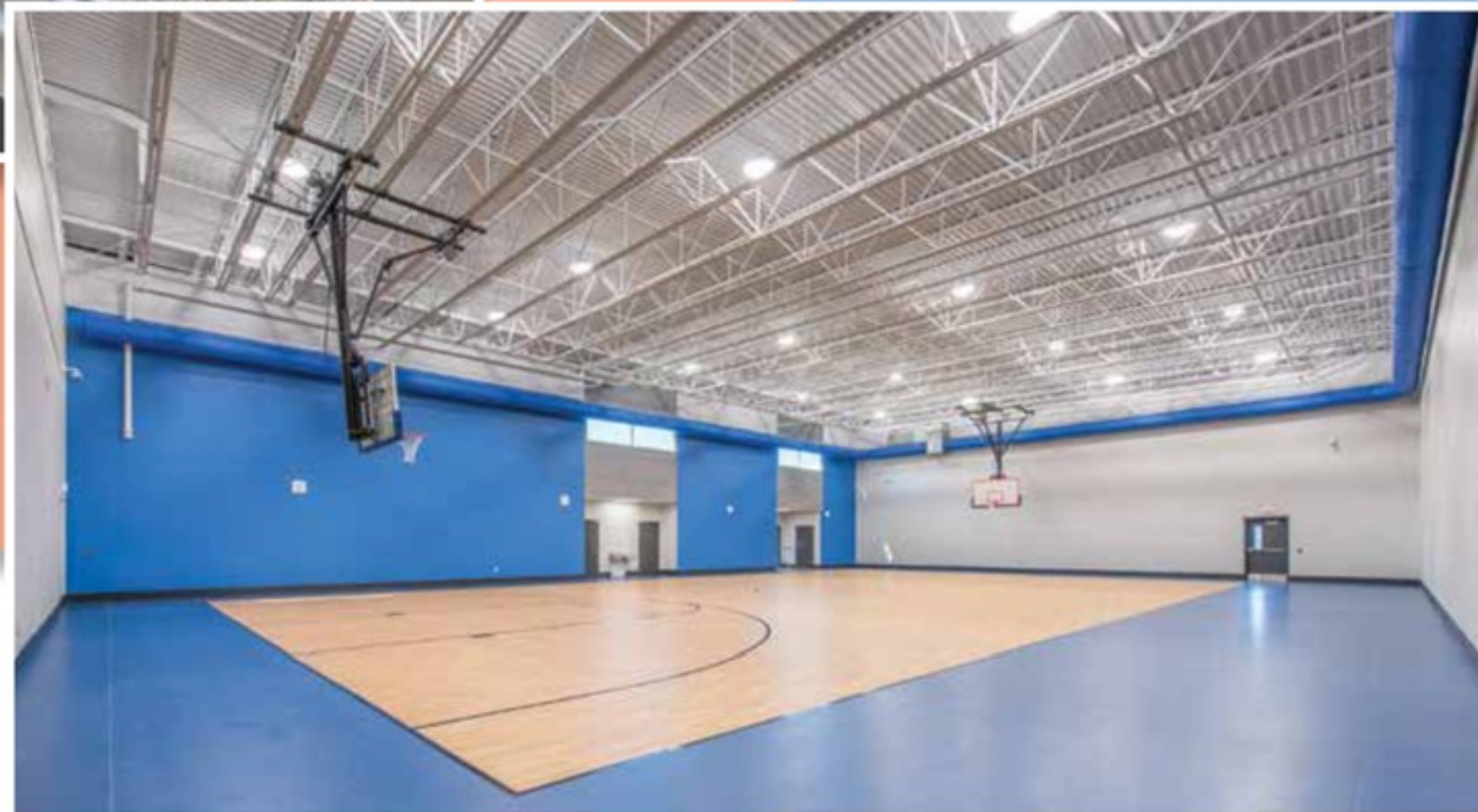Natural light creates a warmer environment than harsh institutional lighting.

Areas for sport and play help juveniles burn excess energy.

Architecture for Outcomes

Rehabilitation, Safety & Recidivism for Juvenile Youth

By Karen Sicner

Nearly 100,000 juvenile youth are locked up behind bars, within cinderblock cells, breathing cold, stale air and residing within aggressive environments. When children are committed in a punitive setting, they learn to become better criminals — which is why recidivism rates can be so high in areas of the country where juvenile justice facilities mirror high security prisons.

At Wakefield Beasley & Associates, A NELSON Brand we believe in providing architecture for outcomes. For juvenile detention centers, those outcomes need to be geared towards safety, rehabilitation and lowering the rates of recidivism. We believe that the architectural design can support a nourishing environment that facilitates learning, community, and cooperation, with the goal of changing the trajectory of incarcerated youth to a more positive direction.

Architecture for Safety

We believe that safety for the youth, staff and community are essential in designing juvenile facilities. Keeping the operational flow condensed and efficient for staff to operate and youth to learn is key in providing a safe environment.

During the feasibility studies and the preliminary design phase, our architects will take into account the goals of the county and create recommendations that provide the safest environment for all parties. Design configurations include multi-bed pod infrastructures, each adjacent to a centralized activity space, with a control room present for staff observation. Classrooms for education and behavioral programs typically are nestled along a central corridor that leads to medical areas, contact and non-contact visitation spaces and administrative offices.

The use of technology such as video cameras and security systems are addressed in the design in order to protect all detention center occupants but reside within inconspicuous areas.

Architecture for Rehabilitation

Juvenile detention facilities with a rehabilitation focus provide a positive environment for kids to work on their behavior, learn positive life skills and open the lines of communication with their families.

Flexible learning spaces that can be used for educational or behavioral purposes support programs that address youth's concentration and listening skills, anger management, drug and alcohol treatment issues,

Setting aside areas where juvenile youth can burn excess energy can help them concentrate on their behavioral programs and facilitate a life-lasting change.

Flexible learning spaces can support a variety of programs.

and family counseling services. Our designs are equipped with areas that are multi-purpose and can fulfill the needs of various social services all within one centralized area.

Activity is also key for juvenile rehabilitation, and architectural plans are created to provide both interior activity areas where youth can play basketball, exercise with gym equipment or run, and exterior areas to engage in outdoor sports. Setting aside areas where juvenile youth can burn excess energy can help them concentrate on their behavioral programs and facilitate a life-lasting change.

We have also found that designs which support natural environments through day lighting and softer interior lights create a warmer tone within the space, rather than the stark, cold ambiance of institutional lighting. We choose lighting that represents a home environment which we have found subconsciously relaxes the juvenile youth and allows them to be more open to programming that is key to their rehabilitation.

Architecture for Recidivism

Rehabilitation and recidivism are highly linked, since you cannot lower recidivism rates without an effective rehabilitation plan. To lower rates of recidivism starts with a culture of empowerment, which is reinforced through staff engagement with the juvenile youth. Successful recidivism also depends upon positive re-entry programs, which can be supported through architectural design at the facility.

Ideal designs would feature campus-like infrastructures, linking resident areas with community programming, spaces for education and schools that aid in the transition from juvenile detention centers and community re-entry.

Architectural design can support these re-entry programs through by creating campuses which include the detention center and re-entry facility, all within close proximity. This way, educational programming and behavioral programming can be provided in one centralized location, reducing costs and preventing the youth from becoming repeat offenders.

Wakefield Beasley & Associates, A NELSON Brand focus on architectural solutions for outcomes. Our goal is to help our clients achieve their goals with the support of architecture design, effective master planning and appealing interiors; all with the intention of achieving a healthy ROI.

Karen Sicner, AIA, is director of the Justice Studio at Wakefield Beasley & Associates, a NELSON Company, which has completed a wide variety of juvenile justice reform projects and fully understands the various challenges regarding a successful conversion.