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Court uses alternative way to deal with youth

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GREENVILLE — The Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative is a new method county court Judge Vernita King Johnson's office uses keep kids from being locked up.

Doris Benford, JDAI Site Coordinator, said they seek alternative methods rather than locking the at risk youth in a secured detention facility.

“We do a risk assessment on each child when an offense is committed and we look at each child differently,” said Benford. “With the assessment, there is a points system in place and depending on what the child scores is how it is determined whether they're go to a secure detention facility or not.”

Benford said the goal is to create a safe and nurturing environment that provides the tools needed for at risk youth to become healthy, productive citizens.

“We look for mentors, various community groups, social activities, tutoring —really anything that will help re-route their behavior from the negative to the positive,” Benford said. “There are consequences for their actions and once they end up in front of the judge, we don't want to lock them up, but rather find a way to put them on the right track.”

The youth who end up in Judge Johnson's court have typically committed delinquent acts and are status offenders.

“Status offenses are things like truancy, alcohol, runaways and incorrigible children,” said Johnson. “Incorrigible children are the number one offense.”

Johnson defined incorrigible children as a child that is habitually disobedient and beyond the control of a parent.

“This may be where drugs come in - the erratic behavior, threatening to siblings and their family,” Johnson said. “They can also be destructive to property and themselves.”

According to Benford, the use of alternative methods are producing some positive results.

“We’re seeing our numbers decrease,” Benford said. “And that is what we want. We’re not trying to do away with detention; we’re trying to keep kids out of detention.”

The Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative began, March 1, 2009. Benford and Johnson have been working 300 cases through the JDAI and both feel it is a viable alternative.

“So far, so good and we’re seeing some really good results,” said Benford. “Things are improving and some of the kids are starting to talk about correcting their behavior. They want to be different and I think it is starting to have a positive effect on them.”

Benford said the community is getting more involved with the JDAI, but it could use more help.

“We’re pleading with the community to help these kids,” she said. “We need help with after school programs, tutors; help with any kind of social activities or arts and crafts.”

Johnson likes to be able to place a child in a program that suits their abilities.

“If one comes through my courtroom who likes to paint graffiti, I feel like they need to be in a program that nurtures the art side of them,” she said. “They need to be able to channel that energy into positive areas.”

Benford said gangs prey on the youth and look for their strengths to lure them in.

“The gangs are very well organized and know how to get to these kids,” she said. “They know if they love art or music, or are good with their hands. The gangs are going to put them to work doing what they like. We want to be able to get them and redirect that behavior into something positive and productive.”

Benford is now analyzing the data gathered from the 300 cases they have been working through the JDAI method since March. According to the data, Benford said the county is already saving money and the number of cases going to court is less.

“We are seeing improvements and less kids going through the courts,” she said. “And we’re still going through the data, but so far, it is working well.”

Johnson, too, is pleased with the results, but would like to see more involvement from the community.

“This is something good happening here and we’re glad for it,” she said. “And if you truly want to help save the children of this community - get involved.”

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