

Rankin County Youth Court Judge works on delinquency and crime prevention plan

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Many of the Rankin County children who must be placed in foster care as a result of abuse or neglect return to Youth Court accused of delinquent acts, Judge Tom Broome said.

“What I’ve found is that unfortunately, the children who were themselves victims are at much greater risk to become delinquents,” said Judge Broome, who has served as a Rankin County Youth Court judge for seven years.

“What we see is a pipeline from dependency to delinquency to criminality,” Judge Broome said. “They go from being abused children to delinquents to criminals.”

Judge Broome is working to create a multi-agency action plan to identify children at risk of progressing to delinquency and crime and provide early intervention and prevention.

Judge Broome is working to devise way to screen and assess children initially entering foster care as a result of abuse or neglect. The proposed approach is to bring together a multi-disciplinary team which would screen each abused or neglected child and evaluate that child’s circumstances. The screening would identify risks and needs, as well as a child’s strengths, and direct the child and family to community-based services for intervention and treatment.

Judge Broome calls the plan Project FABRIC, Fostering Achievement by Risk Intervention Collaboration. FABRIC will focus on the strengths of the child in an effort to assist in skill development, as well as on the child and family’s needs in an effort to direct them to community-based services.

Judge Broome said, “This is going to identify those children who are at risk to become future delinquents and provide preventive services to keep them from making the transition from dependent to delinquent.”

Judge Broome said that national statistics point to a connection between child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency. The National Institute of Justice in its February 2001 report, “Research in Brief: An Update on the Cycle of Violence,” stated that:

- being abused or neglected as a child increased the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 59 percent, as an adult by 28 percent, and for a violent crime by 30 percent;
- maltreated children were younger at the time of their first arrest, committed nearly twice as many offenses, and were arrested more frequently;
- physically abused and neglected (versus sexually abused) children were the most likely to be arrested later for a violent crime.

Although no statistics are available locally on the cross-over from abused and neglected children to delinquents, the anecdotal evidence is there, Judge Broome said. He has seen numerous instances in which children whom he had ordered removed from

neglectful or abusive homes showed back up in Youth Court accused of committing crimes or delinquent acts.

Judge Broome, whose undergraduate training and work before law school was in mechanical engineering, said, "If we can get to the root cause of the problem, we don't have to deal with all the bad effects.

"If we can address the children's needs and the family's needs and correct those problems early, then we won't have future juvenile delinquents or adult criminals, and we will have ultimately a stronger family," Judge Broome said. If intervention occurs earlier, "the child could remain with the family and they could have a better home environment to grow up in, which ultimately will make them a better citizen and a better parent themselves."

Judge Broome began putting his ideas for needed change into an action plan during a week-long education and research program at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. He was among about 30 people from across the nation selected to participate in a leadership program conducted June 12-18 by the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute.

He submitted a draft of his FABRIC plan to the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform July 1. He hopes to have a working model in place by September.

The initial phase of the project will involve identification of the multi-disciplinary FABRIC team members. Included will be staff from the Division of Family and Children Services and Division of Youth Services of the Mississippi Department of Human Services, Attorney General's office, Division of Medicaid, Department of Mental Health, Department of Health, Department of Education, Department of Public Safety, Administrative Office of Courts, and the Department of Employment Security. Local team members will include Rankin County Youth Court personnel, prosecutors, public defenders, attorney guardians ad litem, selected foster care providers, Region 8 Mental Health Services and the Rankin County School District.

FABRIC will coordinate the efforts of all of those entities to better serve children and families.

Judge Broome said that he doesn't anticipate an increase in the cost of services already being provided. He is working to obtain foundation grant funding to assist with implementation of the plan. He believes the preventive approach could save money.

"There would be fewer tax dollars spent to repair damage later," he said.

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