

## **Harrison County officials seek alternatives to juvenile detention**

July 9, 2012

The Harrison County Youth Court will hold a kick-off meeting for its Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. July 13 at the Harrison County Youth Court in Gulfport.

More than 30 local officials, community leaders, law enforcement officers, attorneys, educators, social services representatives, treatment providers and non-profit organization leaders have been invited to participate. The program will include an introduction to the national Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) reform initiative, findings from a local stakeholders' meeting conducted in February, a question and answer session, and development of a first year work plan.

The Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative is a national program which seeks to eliminate inappropriate or unnecessary use of secure detention, minimize re-arrest and failure to appear rates pending adjudication, ensure appropriate conditions of confinement in secure detention, reduce racial and ethnic disparities, and redirect resources to sustain successful reforms, according to Gloria Salters, state co-coordinator for JDAI.

Harrison County Court Judge Margaret Alfonso, who presides over the county's Youth Court, said, "JDAI is a national initiative to improve the juvenile justice system. The mission is to improve the juvenile justice system without compromising public safety....JDAI is built on the foundation that secure detention is to be used for those who are a danger to the public, or a flight risk."

Juveniles who are neither a danger to the community or a flight risk can benefit from rehabilitative programs without being in confinement. Judge Alfonso said, "You just can't treat juveniles like you would adult prisoners. With children, there has to be a true commitment to rehabilitation, as opposed to just punishment. There are better ways of dealing with the juvenile justice system than incarceration."

Harrison County Youth Court already works with non-profits to place at-risk children in constructive programs. Last summer, Hope Community Development Agency of Biloxi paid for six youths ages 15 to 17 to work for the Youth Court. Nine teens are working for the Youth Court this summer, Judge Alfonso said. The teens do office work and help with recreation, crafts and feeding of children housed at a shelter. The court also found outside funding to enable three children to attend a summer camp.

"What I'm doing is keeping them busy and keeping them off the streets," Judge Alfonso said. "It's career-building, character-building, recreational and fun.... You just have to find their strengths and nurture that and help them with their weaknesses. Every child has a strength. We don't always find it early enough," she said.

Judge Alfonso said she looks forward to having training and technical resources which the JDAI program can provide. JDAI will help participating entities better utilize resources they have, and work to promote collaboration within the juvenile justice system.

Harrison County is the most recent of five Mississippi counties to participate in the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. Adams, Leflore and Washington counties were the

original pilot sites starting in 2008. Rankin County became involved in the program in 2010, said Assistant Attorney General Patricia Marshall, state co-coordinator for the JDAI project.

Initial funding for the three pilot counties came from the private, non-profit Annie E. Casey Foundation. The U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention provides continuing funding through a Juvenile Accountability Block Grant administered through the state Department of Public Safety Division of Public Safety Planning, and the Casey Foundation provides some funding, Marshall said.

Rankin, Adams, Leflore and Washington counties all saw decreases in the numbers of juveniles detained during the 2011 fiscal year, according to Salters. Rankin County saw a 4.2 percent decrease; Adams, 5.1 percent; Leflore, 12.6 percent; and Washington County, 11.2 percent.

Counties participating in JDAI use a systematic approach to evaluate all cases to determine whether a juvenile should be detained. A risk assessment tool uses a point system that takes into account the nature and seriousness of the offense and other factors. The point score on the risk assessment determines who should be detained, released or supervised in an alternative program.

The risk assessment evaluation process helped Washington County reduce the number of juveniles held in detention, said County Court Judge Vernita King Johnson. However, she said there is work to be done toward reducing the number of juveniles who are taken into custody.

Judge Johnson said that in Washington County, African-American juveniles are taken into custody in disproportionate numbers. Ninety-eight percent of the juveniles who are brought to the Washington County Juvenile Detention Center are African American; the population of Washington County is about 65 percent African American, Judge Johnson said.

“We want everyone to get equal treatment regardless of race, class or culture. We want that in our juvenile justice system. We want it to be a neutral setting,” Judge Johnson said. “We want to deal with the offenses. We want to deal with the circumstances. We don’t want to deal with race, class or culture because that should not come into play with regard to what to do with this child or that child. A child is a child.”

Rankin County utilizes an electronic monitoring system and GPS tracking for some of those released under Youth Court supervision, according to Rankin County JDAI Coordinator Dawn Mapp. Juveniles who qualify wear ankle bracelets which track their whereabouts. The juveniles are able to remain in their current school setting and receive community based services while ensuring public safety and personal accountability.

Since February, juvenile officers with the Rankin County Sheriff’s Department have organized a series of life skills presentations for youths in detention and on probation. Presentations included discussions of credit, careers, job hunting and interviewing, drug abuse, drunken driving, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and etiquette.

“We want them to be successful,” said Rankin County Juvenile Detention Center Director Lt. Eric Fox.

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