

Harrison County Youth Court has state's first court-based GED, wellness programs

December 6, 2012

Harrison County leads the state in reuniting children with families after allegations of abuse, neglect or delinquency require intervention by the Department of Human Services and the Youth Court.

Court officials and staff focus on meeting families' needs and finding resources to help them better care for children. The Youth Court formed partnerships with Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College and the State Department of Health to start the state's first GED program and Wellness Clinic located on site at a Youth Court. Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College provides two part-time adult education teachers who conduct four classes a week. The Department of Health provides a nurse, maternal child coordinator and social worker who provide health services at the Wellness Clinic twice a month. The State Department of Mental Health and the Harrison County Juvenile Drug Court also provide programs to assist children and families who come under Youth Court jurisdiction.

Harrison County Court Judge Margaret Alfonso, who presides over the Youth Court, set up the Wellness Clinic and GED classes to address some of the underlying problems which can contribute to abuse, neglect and delinquency. Healthy and better educated parents are able to provide better care for children, she said.

Gina Kirkwood, clerical branch director for the Department of Health, said the point of contact with parents and children at the Youth Court provides another opportunity to connect needy people with available health care services. Some services may be provided on the spot, and appointments can be made for other medical care. "It's just a great opportunity for us to come and see what are the needs of these ladies and their children and to let them know what services are available," Kirkwood said.

The programs grew so fast that they outgrew space at the Youth Court. The Harrison County Board of Supervisors provided trailers which had previously been used to house other local government services in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Harrison County Supervisor Connie Rockco cut ribbons Nov. 30 on three buildings which house the GED program, Wellness Clinic, Drug Court and Department of Human Services space for supervised parental visitation. Gulf Coast Mental Health clinicians will be able to move from the original Youth Court complex to a fourth trailer when furniture becomes available. Harrison County Court Appointed Special Advocates, CASA, with 80 volunteers, works from another trailer.

Rockco said, "It takes a village (to raise a child), and that's exactly what has happened."

Department of Human Services Deputy Director Mark Smith said, "It takes everyone (working) to make these children successful once we remove them from an environment and put them back. To know that Harrison County leads the state in reunification is a badge of honor for everyone here today. That's a very hard thing to do, once a child is removed, to get a child reunified with a family."

Smith thanked the CASA volunteers, court officials and DHS's social workers for their efforts to help children. "It's not a job. It's a calling," he said.

“As I travel around the state and visit with other judges and other jurisdictions, I always talk about Judge Alfonso and what she has going on down here,” Smith said.

Better education benefits parents and children. “We all know that education is the foundation of everything we do in life. Once you have it, no one can ever take it away from you,” Smith said. “I’m living proof that an education can remove you from any kind of environment. When I grew up I was very poor.”

Department of Health Regional Director Theresa Kemp praised Judge Alfonso for her leadership and support. She is a judge who “will come out, step in and wear our shoes and teach us.”

Judge Alfonso initiated a partnership with Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College to provide GED classes in July 2011. She called Director of Adult Basic Education Becky Layton to inquire about starting a GED class, and Layton immediately agreed. Classes grew from two nights a week in a small courtroom to four nights a week, and a Saturday class is being considered to meet the demand. More than 20 students have earned a GED, 25 are enrolled now, and there’s a waiting list to get into the program, Layton said.

“This day marks another milestone in meeting the educational needs of the residents of Harrison County,” Layton said.

Samantha Rollison, 26, of Gulfport, who earned a GED with the help of the court program, will enroll as a full-time student at Jefferson Davis Community College in January. “I can’t wait,” said Rollison, a fast-food cashier and mother of four.

Rollison had dropped out of high school in the 11th grade. “I just didn’t want to be in school any more. I lost faith in myself.” GED teacher Sarah Wallen provided encouragement as well as classroom help. Rollison earned her GED certificate after about a month and half of classes. “When I took my GED and got the scores, it was an amazing feeling of accomplishment. I did this,” she said. After the ribbon-cutting, she approached Alfonso about working as a mentor for others.

Adica Baldwin, 18, of Biloxi, grew up in foster care and ran away as a teenager. She dropped out of school in 10th grade. The GED program gave her individualized help. She lacks only the math portion to complete her GED certificate.

“It motivated me to keep striving for an education. It also motivated me to be a good mother so my daughter does not have to go through what I did,” said Baldwin, who has a 5-month-old. She is excited about an upcoming job interview.

GED teacher Sandra Williams, a retired educator and DHS social worker, said she feels blessed to be able to help the GED students. “There are going to be more and more doors to open for them,” Williams said.

#####