

New program keeping troubled youths out of judicial system

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A system of referring troubled teens to Family Support Centers rather than to detention facilities is keeping a large number of them out of the juvenile justice system, according to a new study drawing national attention. Since the program's launch in 2007, there has been a 41 percent decline in the number of youth who break rules but not the law referred to juvenile court, and a 94 percent decrease in the number of those youth cases handled by the judicial system.

Developed by the Connecticut Judicial Branch's Court Support Services under the direction of an advisory board led by two University of Connecticut professors, the model is seen as so successful it's being touted as a "best practice" by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. So-called "status offenders" are youth who are chronic runaways, habitually truant, engage in risky behavior or are unruly at home. In the past, many of them would end up in detention centers. The General Assembly put the end to that in 2005, then followed up by naming the advisory board to come up with treatments that status offenders and their families could access without getting locked up.

"In the past, status offenders would have gone before a judge, established a court record and gone down a route that more often than not led from status offender to delinquent to adult criminal," said Preston Britner, a professor in the Human Development and Family Studies department at UConn.

Britner co-chaired the advisory panel with Martha Stone, an adjunct professor at the UConn Law School and executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy. Their panel met monthly before it was disbanded on July 1, 2010. It developed the Family Support Centers model, which is administered and coordinated by the Court Supported Services Division of the state judiciary.

Stone said the hope was to get one in every judicial district in the state, but they had to settle, at first, for four, including one in Bridgeport. This year, there will be eight more.

In Bridgeport, the Family Support Center is run by Connecticut Renaissance, a nonprofit agency, at 1120 Main Street. Youth are referred to the centers by schools, parents, and others.

Maria Lamb, program director of the Bridgeport center, said the agency deals with up to 45 youth and their families at a time on an out-patient basis, and about 100 to 120 a year.

"Say a kid is not going to school. The school files a Family with Service Needs complaint. That referral gets sent to us and we take the lead on it. The student isn't delinquent. They didn't steal a car. They are called status offenders under administrative supervision," said Lamb.

After an assessment, a treatment plan is developed based on services and therapies the youth and his family needs.

"When we can provide services, rather than punishment, what happens is we're able to treat the cause and not just label the kid as bad," said Lamb. "When you put them into detention, what schooling do they get?"

"Sometimes, in the past, these effective and important teen or family based therapies just weren't available to the families," added Britner. "You'd hear horrible stories where parents tried to get kids in trouble just so they can access things they couldn't access without insurance or availability."

Now there is access to educational and therapeutic interventions without the youth having to acquire a court record.

Britner said the system has reduced court costs. In the long run, if the kids stay in school and on track, there will be further savings in reduced welfare rolls and fewer prison beds. That part of the analysis -- tracking how many kids stay in school, graduate and get jobs -- has not yet been done.

Instead, the focus is on the impact to the system. In addition to ending detention placements, the data shows a significant reduction in court referrals of status offenders -- from 3,521 in 2006-07 to 2,102 in 2007-08 to 2,062 in 2008-09.

Prior to the centers, Connecticut averaged about 300 status offenders in detention each year. It cost between \$3,500 and \$5,600 for a two week stay in such a facility. The average treatment cost for a youth in a Family Service Center is \$3,750.

The only other states with similar Family Support Centers are Florida and New York, Britner said.