

Group seeks clues to juvenile crime

By Beth Smith

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There are many areas in which a person would be proud for their hometown to take the lead: Employment opportunities, the number of high school and college graduates and the number of community members who volunteer.

However, there are probably an equal number of areas in which people want their hometown or county to lag.

The number of juveniles facing charges -- whether criminal charges or status offenses such as truancy or being a habitual runaway -- is one of them.

Unfortunately, this is not what was happening here until a small group of key people became informed.

"We realized that (Henderson County) was leading in juvenile petitions (or charges) ... where more kids are being accused of more crimes than in any other county in the state," said Henderson District Judge Rob Wiederstein.

More specifically, the distinction occurred in 2008 when more juveniles per capita were charged here than in any other county in the state, according to County Attorney Steve Gold.

It isn't that Henderson County is soft on juvenile crime, Gold said. In fact in 2008, Henderson County ranked 12th in the state for locking up juveniles for status offenses and 10th in the state for detaining those committing crimes, according to statistics from Kids Count, a Kentucky data collection center.

However, "the consequences (issued by) the court weren't stopping (juveniles) from committing offenses," said Family Court Judge Sheila Farris.

As the facts began to emerge, conversations began to occur among those in the court system, law enforcement and the Henderson County School System, she said.

The group discovered, Wiederstein said, that "We rely on juvenile detention facilities as the stick to get kids to behave, and it costs (the state) between \$200 and \$300 a day."

"So the thing we use is very expensive and research is unanimous that it's not effective in changing future behavior," he said.

Gold said it isn't just the state who pays the tab for housing juvenile detainees.

Henderson County receives a bill every time a youth is placed in a facility, he said.

According to County Treasurer Becky Carroll, between September 2009 and September 2010, the county spent roughly \$33,587 for juvenile detention expenses.

Armed with research and information, this group of local judges, prosecutors, law enforcement and school officials approached the Department of Juvenile Justice asking for an audit of Henderson County records.

Both the DJJ and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, a federal agency, have since gotten involved.

In fact, the DJJ has been using a data collection tool called Forms And Resource Referral Information System or FARRIS.

"DJJ has run 291 (juvenile cases) from Henderson County between 2008-2010 through FARRIS," Judge Farris said.

The goal is to follow the cases from start to finish "to see the resources we're using and the efficacy of those resources," she said, and whether other resources should be used.

"We're looking for correlations," Gold said.

"If we're not doing something to put a child back on the path of being successful, then we're not helping the community," he said.

The group is expecting to see the data collected by DJJ within the next several days.

Meanwhile, the conversations are continuing.

Gold praised the school system for proactive steps in implementing a program at the middle schools and Henderson County High School adapted from the Kentucky Center for Instructional Discipline and known as Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports or P.B.I.S.

Steve Steiner, director of pupil personnel, said the program has been in place at the elementary schools for many years. Since beginning at the middle schools and the high school, charges against juveniles have decreased.

"P.B.I.S teaches and trains students what the schools expect of them and how they need to behave," Steiner said.

"(The charges) have gone down drastically in truancy, theft and assault issues," since implementing P.B.I.S., he said.

"This is about being smart on crime and smart on kids," Gold said. "The schools have been able to handle a lot ... but not all the (charges) came from schools.

"What we're looking to do is create options so that kids can face up to what they've done and be accountable ... face the consequences and make it right," he said.

"We're looking into what we can do (differently)," Wiederstein said.

This isn't a free pass on bad behavior, he said.

"There are ways to hold kids accountable for their actions without throwing them in the detention center," Wiederstein said.

"A child from my court, who may go to a juvenile detention facility for truancy, could be in the same facility with a child from Judge Wiederstein's court who is there for murder" or another violent crime, Farris said.

The group said some juveniles should be in a facility for public safety. However, for the rest, there needs to be some alternatives to detention.

"It's been observed that juvenile reformatories are schools for crime," Wiederstein said. "When you put kids together who commit crimes, you get more crimes from those kids," he said.

Gold said the data and recommendations from DJJ and from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention will be important tools in moving toward a solution.

"Once we have those, we're going to assemble a large group in an effort to formulate programs to keep kids from being sent to detention facilities" if they don't need to be there, Gold said.

"Then we're going to ask different players to fund these programs, and we're going to challenge the community to support these programs and get involved."



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