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Adams targeting sentencing for youths

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Juvenile crime is down in Leflore County, but Judge Kevin Adams isn't satisfied.

With help from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, he is working on ideas for reducing the number of locked-up children.

"Public safety is always paramount, but we have to help these kids so they don't end up in the adult system," said Adams, a Leflore County judge who also oversees the youth court.

A new effort here called the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative is intended to develop different options for youth judges during sentencing other than putting offenders in a detention center.

For example, a child could be ordered to attend a program at a church or community center between school and a court-ordered curfew.

Adams is recruiting churches and civic and community leaders to volunteer their time. The Greenwood Mentoring Group, for one, has already signed on to participate.

"I think it is God-sent," said Bill Clay, the organization's founder. "A lot of kids are traveling down the wrong road not because they're bad kids but simply because of a lack of guidance."

Clay said young men come out of lockup no more productive or responsible than when they entered. Sentencing them instead to places such as the mentoring group's learning center on Avenue G, which will open soon, will "instill them with a reason to succeed," Clay said.

The idea is not new.

In other states, the Annie E. Casey Foundation — which was started by the founder of UPS and named after his mother — has been very successful, Adams said. It has helped reduce juvenile detention rates and juvenile crime rates by double digits.

The foundation picked Leflore, Washington and Adams counties as pilot sites for a three-year trial run in Mississippi.

The Mississippi Attorney General's Office is another partner, and if the program works here, that office and Casey Foundation would like to implement it statewide, Adams said.

Leflore County has already seen some success in fighting youth crime.

Since Adams was appointed in April 2008, he said, the number of juveniles in court per week has dropped from about 20-30 to 10-15.

The judge said he's not sure why that is. He speculated that the hard-line stance he took when he first came into office might have scared some straight, or perhaps a slow economy means since more parents don't have a job, they're spending more time at home supervising their offspring.

Adams said the sentencing initiative should give youth court ways to stop problems before they escalate. Right now his only tools besides locking children up or setting them free are probation, curfew or the Adolescent Offender Program at Life Help.

He's recruiting local leaders now to form committees to come up with ideas for other possibilities for the program, which is in its first year of three. The Casey Foundation isn't providing much in terms of grant money but contributes resources, literature and connections with ideas that have worked elsewhere.

Angela Kimbrough, the youth court's staff attorney, is actively seeking grants.

Adams said he has also discussed doing community service projects through the city of Greenwood with Mayor Carolyn McAdams, and McAdams is on board with the idea.

The judge would like to see churches open their buildings for afterschool programs and have members agree to be mentors.

"It just depends on community involvement," he said. "That's where it's hit a wall."

Eventually, Adams would like to see youth centers in each community so children can both get to them daily on their own and feel safe. For instance, a child from McLaurin Street might not feel comfortable attending with his peers from the Gibbs/Palace Street neighborhood, Adams said. Rural towns such as Itta Bena and Sidon would also ideally have their own centers.

He said he is excited about the possibilities for further improvement.

"If we can get the community involvement we need, I think it will really help Leflore County," Adams said.

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