

Legislators from other states visit model Rankin Juvenile Justice Center

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Twenty-seven legislators from across the country visited the Rankin County Juvenile Justice Center Oct. 17. Legislators from as far away as Alaska and Puerto Rico came to learn about a model program that provides days packed with activities and classroom instruction and little time spent in a cell.

The Rankin County program works to change behavior rather than punish, to keep the detention stay as short as possible, and to set youth on a path that won't lead them back to juvenile court and into adult prison.

Rankin County Sheriff Bryan Bailey, whose department oversees the detention facility, told the visitors, "My mind-set has changed over the last 25 years. At one time I would have said lock them up and throw away the key. That's not going to work. We are just going to fill up the jails. Some of them we can help. Some of them we can't help. We need to help those that we can."

Noting Mississippi's long history at the bottom of national rankings, Bailey said, "It's great that we have something that people from outside would want to come look at."

The visiting legislators are members of the National Conference of State Legislatures Quad Caucus. The Quad Caucus is made up of members African American, Asian, Hispanic and Native American legislative caucuses from across the country. Their visit is part of a collaborative effort to address racism and policies that can increase disparities in education, health, and economic stability in the family. The three-year program, funded by a grant from the Kellogg Foundation, seeks to address structural racism and work toward racial healing.

Rankin County is one of five Mississippi counties which participate in the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. JDAI is a national program which seeks to eliminate inappropriate or unnecessary use of secure detention, reduce racial and ethnic disparities, minimize re-arrest and failure to appear rates, ensure appropriate conditions of confinement in secure detention, and redirect resources to sustain successful reforms.

Lt. Michelle Rhodes, director of the Rankin County Juvenile Detention Center, said, "Anything that we are doing here, we want to pass on."

The Rankin County Juvenile Detention Center deals with juvenile offenders from Rankin and about 20 other counties. The average daily population is about 20. The maximum capacity is 42. Mississippi's Youth Court Act limits detention to 90 days. The average stay at the Rankin County facility is four and a half days.

"Detention is not something that you use for the wrong reason," said Rankin County Youth Court Judge Thomas Broome, vice-chair of the state Juvenile Detention and Alternatives Task Force. The Mississippi Legislature created the task force to explore alternatives to juvenile detention, formulate recommendations for licensing standards for juvenile detention facilities, and seek funding sources to improve juvenile programs.

The Rankin County program seeks to improve behavior by assessing the youths' needs, evaluating their education level, mental health and family environment, and applying a healthy dose of care and attention. These kids need to be built up," Rhodes said. "What we are trying to do here is give them hope."

"We deal with a lot of kids that are hurting. They have been abused," Rhodes said. "We have a lot of kids that come in here that have been beaten down. They are beaten down by their family. They are beaten down by their environment. Some of them are raised by the streets."

“We have kids that have read here for the first time. We have kids that have had a birthday party here for the first time. I work for a sheriff that lets me think outside the box,” she said. “What they have been doing all these years hasn’t worked, so let’s do something different.”

Rhodes does not see “bad” kids. “No, honey, you are behaviorally challenged,” she said.

Rhodes talked fast, outlining a long list of programs and activities for legislators during their short visit.

Youths are up at 6 a.m., and it’s lights out at 8:30 p.m. How is that possible? “We wear them out” with activities, Rhodes said.

Daily classroom instruction from three teachers tracks the Rankin County School District curriculum. An evaluation looks for students’ weak academic areas, and instruction puts extra emphasis on those areas.

“Our goal in the Rankin County School District is to empower those kids with an education,” said Charlotte Young, director of student support services and dropout prevention.

The detention center also has special programs. On Tuesday mornings, there’s music therapy. Thursday afternoons include an art class and an outside speaker.

Those classes revealed gifted musicians and talented artists who had run afoul of the juvenile court system. And in the academic setting, “We have people with intellects that have never been challenged,” Judge Broome said.

Wednesday has movie and popcorn night, and Thursday has music and game night. Family visitation is Tuesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, with free phone calls home on Saturday. Religious services are offered Sunday and Monday if youths wish to participate.

It’s structured. Youths learn to say “please,” and “thank you.” They walk in line from activity to activity.

The facility recently implemented the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program. A grant paid for iPads, computers and recreational equipment. Good behavior earns time to use those. Behavioral incidents dropped from 67 in May to 12 in October, Rhodes said.

The Sheriff’s Department and Youth Court reached out to the community for help. Volunteers teach art classes, give haircuts, and bake birthday cakes.

“It’s the people that make this a model system,” Judge Broome said.

The Rankin County Chamber of Commerce helps with a youth leadership program. Local businesses support a youth running team, providing shoes, clothes and paying entry fees. Bailey and other officers run with them several evenings a week. They are training for the Mississippi Blues Marathon on January.

“Many of these kids have never met any goals,” Rhodes said. The running team gives them that.

Youth in the program also take a trip to feed the homeless at one of Jackson’s shelters. It gives them a taste of what they can expect if they continue to dabble in drugs and crime. It also lets them know that things aren’t so bad in their own world, Rhodes said.

The legislators took a tour of the facility. A long haired brown mix-breed dog and a young yellow mutt greeted them in the outside exercise yard, joyfully rearing up and licking the hands and faces of several who knelt to pet them. They are part of Bailey’s Paws for a Cause program. Since the program started two years ago, 40 dogs picked up by the county’s animal control unit have become part of the pet therapy program. The youths take care of the animals, and local veterinarians donate medical care.

“We are not only able to save an animal. It’s good therapy for the kids here in the detention center,” Rhodes said.

Warm and fuzzy aside, there’s an urgency as well as intensity at the Rankin facility. “This is kind of the last stop for a lot of the kids,” Rhodes said.

It doesn’t work for everybody. Rhodes said she has been brought to tears after learning that a youth was charged with armed robbery after release.

“The kids want to do good, but we are sending them back to the same toxic environment” which they came from, she said.

Judge Broome said many come from families in turmoil. “Many of the children come from what I call ‘hot boxes,’ ” with family members struggling with alcohol, drugs, untreated mental health issues and domestic violence. “The kids fare better if they can get the services and learn how to navigate the home environment,” he said.

“These are the kids that are at the highest risk,” he said. “These are the kids that may become homeless. These are the kids that are going to be incarcerated. These are the kids that are going to be breaking into your house and stealing your car.”

The Rankin County program seeks to invest time and money in intervention on the front end in an effort to turn youths’ lives around. “When you invest any time with a child in a positive way, it pays off ten-fold,” Judge Broome said.

Rep. Sharon Tomiko Santos of Washington was impressed with the collaboration between Rankin County’s juvenile justice system, schools and social services. As chair of the Washington State House Education Committee, she was very much interested in the school system’s interaction with the juvenile justice system. “I think this county is to be commended for adopting a very open-minded approach,” Santos said.

Sen. Carmelo Rios Santiago of Puerto Rico said 2,000 juveniles are in detention there. They can be locked up for up to two years. The recidivism rate is 65 percent. “That tells us right away something is not working.”

Oklahoma Rep. Seneca Scott said he was looking for information in advance of a possible overhaul. “Our juvenile justice system is insufficient,” he said. “This was impressive.”

Rep. Scott Kawasaki of Alaska also was studying ideas for reform. Juveniles who return to the court system multiple times are destined to land in adult jails when they turn 18. “The jails are just filling up,” Kawasaki said. “It is positive to see this model working here,” he said. “This is a model that can be replicated.”

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