

Hancock County starts juvenile drug court and parent representation program

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Hancock County has a new juvenile drug court and a new program to provide legal representation for indigent parents accused of abuse and neglect of children.

The new programs are intended to help address the large number of Hancock County children who have been taken into the custody of the Department of Human Services.

Hancock County Youth Court Referee Elise Deano said that parents' drug use is the underlying cause in 80 percent of the cases in which she has ordered removal of children from parents' custody.

Senior Chancery Judge Sandy Steckler, who supervises the Youth Court, said, "I think the drugs are much worse than people know. The drug of choice that we have run into in Hancock County is crystal methamphetamine, which is a very difficult drug to overcome."

The courts also see frequent instances of juvenile drug use. Hancock County Youth Court during 2014 saw 126 juveniles who tested positive for drugs, had drug-related offenses, or both. From Jan. 1 through June 16 this year, 47 juveniles tested positive or had drug-related offenses, or both, and five were hospitalized for drug overdoses. Juvenile drug use has progressed from marijuana to methamphetamine.

Hancock County Youth Court was granted provisional certification to operate a drug court on July 6. Judge Deano's goal is to begin accepting participants into the Hancock County Juvenile Drug Court in October.

The program will be funded with \$75,000 from the State Drug Court Fund, said State Drug Court Coordinator Joey Craft.

Craft said, "Drug court programs have been highly successful throughout our state. We hope that by implementing a juvenile program in Hancock County, we can offer officials one more tool to help decrease the incidence of drug abuse by teens in this community."

Drug courts are problem-solving courts which utilize drug treatment, drug testing, frequent court appearances and intense supervision. Youths from age 12 to 17 who come under the jurisdiction of Hancock County Youth Court may be referred to the Juvenile Drug Court if they are found to have a substance use disorder. Region 13 Mental Health will conduct crisis intervention, assessments and referrals to treatment. Treatment plans will be tailored to the individual. Participants are expected to stay in the Juvenile Drug Court program from eight to 18 months, depending upon their progress.

Judge Deano said, "I don't see Youth Court as an adversarial court. I see it as, 'We have this problem. How can we all fix this problem?'" The goal in Youth Court is for the families and children who come into the system to leave my court better than the day they walked in. The drug court is an incredible tool that can make improving these teens' lives a reality. All of the stakeholders in the county recognize that drug use and abuse is a problem that is crippling families and negatively impacting the lives of our children."

Judge Deano also is seeking to hire a lawyer to represent indigent parents accused of abuse and neglect of children. She hopes that having a parent representative in Youth Court will expedite the return of children in DHS custody to families, and reduce the number of children in custody.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr. said, "Parent representation is a critical factor in achieving the goal of bringing families back together as a unit."

Attorney Mary Fuller, Youth Court Programs Director for the Administrative Office of

Courts, said, “Research by the American Bar Association shows that when parents are represented at the beginning of a child welfare case, reunification is more likely and occurs more quickly.”

Judge Deano said that when children are removed from the home, for most parents, “the most tragic thing in the world has happened.” Parents who find themselves drawn into Youth Court may not understand the proceedings, or what is required of them to regain custody of children. “I need parent representatives who are somebody who provides a voice they can trust,” Judge Deano said.

Rep. David Baria, chairman of the Hancock County Youth Court Task Force, said, “For many families who have had children removed, it takes longer than necessary to get their children home simply due to a failure to understand the steps required of them. The creation of the parent representative position in Hancock County is important because having a lawyer will speed the process for families.”

The Task Force was formed in January. Rep. Baria said, “The Hancock County Youth Court Task Force has been working to determine the causes of the large number of children from Hancock County in DHS custody and has learned that a high incidence of positive drug test results is clearly a part of the problem. Not only does a positive drug test result in removal of children, but positive results also lengthen the period between removal and reunification of families.”

“Both the Youth Drug Court and the parent representative position are positive steps for Hancock County,” Rep. Baria said.

The Hancock County Board of Supervisors provided \$35,000 for parent representation, and the private, non-profit Casey Family Programs agreed to match that with another \$35,000.

Hancock County will join Youth Courts in Adams, Forrest, Harrison and Rankin counties in a pilot program which provides free legal representation for low-income parents in Youth Court hearings in which allegations of abuse or neglect could result in court-ordered removal of children from parents’ custody. Casey Family Programs funds three of the four existing programs. Seattle-based Casey Family Programs is the nation’s largest private foundation focused entirely on foster care and improving the child welfare system.

Hurricane Katrina set in motion problems that persist a decade later. The number of Hancock County children removed from parents and placed in Department of Human Services custody rose sharply after Hurricane Katrina, Judge Steckler said. Domestic violence also increased. Hancock County accounts for almost 90 percent of the domestic violence cases in the 8th Chancery District, which includes Hancock, Harrison and Stone counties.

Supreme Court Justice Randy Pierce, co-chairman of the Commission on Children’s Justice, has been involved in discussions of ways to address the problems facing Hancock County. “As a result of those conversations, we believe that both the Juvenile Drug Court as well as parent representation will assist the Youth Court of Hancock County to provide faster and more effective resolution of the unique issues facing Hancock County Youth Court,” Justice Pierce said. “We at the court are very appreciative of the involvement of local officials, the local legislative delegation and other stakeholders to find ways to have better outcomes for children.”

Court officials, law enforcement, the Board of Supervisors, schools, mental health providers and the Department of Human Services have wrestled with the problem since it began. Community efforts increased after the first of several public hearings were convened in December 2014. More volunteers joined CASA, Court Appointed Special Advocates. “Churches and other groups are asking what they can do to help. The local community is doing what it can to help,” Judge Steckler said. “It’s become a really positive thing to fight this.”

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