

It's time for a juvenile mental health court in Dallas

Special docket provides an effective alternative to detention, say **advocates**.

The facts about mental health care for children in Texas are grim today and likely to worsen tomorrow with the current state and local budget crisis.

More than 1.2 million children in our state have a diagnosable mental health disorder. One in five children has a mental illness, and one in 10 of these children has a serious mental illness. Even more alarming is that 70 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system potentially suffer from a mental health disorder.

That last number is not surprising, given that Texas ranks 49th in the nation in mental health funding per person. As the second-largest county in Texas, Dallas will definitely see a reduction in already strained public funding for children's mental health services, including those offered in the local juvenile justice system.

But what if there's a simple, proven solution that would enable Dallas County to save taxpayer

dollars and potentially reduce juvenile crime? Four other urban Texas cities — Austin, El Paso, Houston and San Antonio — have embraced this solution with success. Based on their experiences, Dallas County would benefit, too.

The solution is a juvenile mental health court, a special docket that provides an effective alternative to detention for low-risk juvenile offenders with mental illness. The court's goal is to provide children and youth with effective mental health treatment and services in the community instead of placing them in more expensive, potentially less effective detention facilities.

The Dallas County Juvenile Probation Department currently provides several diversionary programs for juveniles in lieu of detention, including education, drug treatment, psychological services and life skills training. Why, then, does Dallas County need a juvenile mental health court?

Most juvenile probation departments utilize a two-pronged approach to determine if a juvenile should be detained in a facility or can be rehabilitated in the commu-

nity. A standard risk assessment used to make this determination may not always result in the best option for each youth. As a result, some are unnecessarily detained, which can be especially traumatic for those with a mental illness.

A juvenile mental health court in Dallas would provide additional screening tools to help identify kids with mental illness early on and determine if they are eligible for and can benefit from the court's community-based programs, instead of detention.

Children At Risk, a statewide research and policy group, recently conducted a thorough evaluation of all four Texas juvenile mental health courts and found cost savings in all four counties. For example, Harris County Juvenile Mental Health Court costs \$150 per day per participant, compared to \$270 per day for detention in a juvenile facility. In El Paso, the total cost of treatment in the juvenile mental health court's special needs diversionary program is \$9,517 per child, compared to \$24,885 in a residential treatment facility.

The study also looked at the rate

of return of offenders to the juvenile justice system, which is a major problem in most places, including Dallas. Remarkably, all four counties with a juvenile mental health court saw a significant reduction in repeat offenses among participants in their programs.

There's no better time than now for a juvenile mental health court in Dallas County. Not only will it offer kids hope for the future, it will also help the county's bottom line at a time when every penny counts.



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