



# UPDATE ON ISSUES

October 2010

League of Women Voters of the Houston Area Education Fund

## Juvenile Justice Reform in Harris County

The Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, was begun in 1992. The initiative has demonstrated that jurisdictions can safely reduce reliance on "secure detention" while at the same time reducing juvenile crime. It is the foundation's view that the group of adolescents at greatest risk of failing to make successful transitions to adulthood are delinquent youth who end up in the "deep end" of the juvenile justice system, in its detention centers and other locked institutions. According to the foundation, these youth come disproportionately from impoverished single-parent homes located in disinvested neighborhoods and have high rates of learning disabilities, mental health, and substance abuse problems.

Harris County was selected in September 2007 to participate in JDAI. In Harris County, the JDAI's objectives include eliminating inappropriate or unnecessary use of secure detention, minimizing juveniles' failures to appear in court, redirecting public finances to reform strategies that work and improving conditions in detention facilities. Harris County is attacking the problem through multiple approaches summarized below.

**Risk Assessment Instrument (RAI)** is used at intake to determine whether or not a youth will remain in the juvenile detention center before court or be allowed to go home to a parent or guardian. Medium risk youth may be released with conditions, which may include participating in an alternative to detention program such as the Juvenile Tracking Program. The county estimates

that use of the RAI has resulted in a 19% decrease in the number of youths detained since implementation in February 2009. The Westside Detention Center closed because of this decrease in detention population.

**Juvenile Tracking Program** monitors youth in their homes and school with up to two contacts per day. It is being funded with state diversionary grant funds.

**Deferred Prosecution Program.** District Attorney Pat Lykos initiated a deferred prosecution program that diverts first-time offenders who commit non-violent misdemeanor offenses into community supervision programs. Since the program began, more than 2,300 juveniles have been diverted to either the 90-day or 180-day program with a reported 90% success rate. The county estimates this has saved the county \$1.5 million.

**Evening Reporting Center.** Harris County's first Neighborhood Evening Reporting Center (ERC) opened in March 2010. This ERC was established with state diversionary grant funds as an alternative to detention. Youth are transported either from school or their homes to the center, which is open between the hours of 3:00 and 9:00 p.m. The ERC provides education programs, recreation, counseling and supervision to probationers. The center is run by Southwest Key Programs.

**Kinder Emergency Shelter** is a collaborative effort with Harris County Protective Services and

provides a community-based residential alternative to detention for those youth whose significant family conflict prevents immediate return home.

### **Special Court Dockets**

The 314<sup>th</sup> District Court holds a voluntary, specialized, diversionary court program for families of youth who are involved in the justice system and have a diagnosis of a mental health problem. The county estimates this is saving approximately \$240 per day, per child.

The 315<sup>th</sup> District Court holds a special Drug Court docket for juveniles with serious alcohol or drug abuse problems. The drug court focuses on rehabilitation rather than punishment.

CHILDREN AT RISK, with the support of the Meadows Foundation, is conducting a state-wide assessment of mental health courts. According to CHILDREN AT RISK, more than 50 percent of youth in Texas' juvenile justice system has a mental health diagnosis (compared to 20 percent for the general youth population).

### **Boot Camp Replaced**

The Harris County Leadership Academy (HCLA) has replaced the old "boot camp" model with a four-phase program called DART (Discipline, Accountability, Redirection and Transition). DART is residential correctional program for adjudicated males, ages 13 to 16, who have been determined by the court to need a strong structured and discipline-oriented program. During 2008, 592 young men participated in the program at the Leadership Academy in west Harris County. Educational classes are provided by teachers from the Juvenile Justice Charter School as well as counseling, anger management and mental health services by MHMRA of Harris County. Juveniles also have the opportunity to participate in a Vocational Education Program in conjunction with San Jacinto College. Trainees who have problems with alcohol and/or drugs are provided treatment via Turning Point of Houston.

### **Measures of Success**

The County reports that from 2007 to 2009: Detention admissions dropped by 24 percent. The average daily detention population in 2009 never exceeded the state mandate of 250.

Petitions filed by the District Attorney's office dropped by 24 percent.

Out-of-home placements dropped by 42 percent.

Commitments to the Texas Youth Commission (TYC) have dropped by 62 percent.

Referrals for juvenile crime are down. The statistics from the County are: a 44% drop in auto theft referrals, a 53% drop in felony drug referrals, and a 31% drop in unauthorized use of motor vehicle referrals.

### **Texas Youth Commission**

The TYC operates state-run institutions for youth committed to its care after being adjudicated delinquent of a felony offense. TYC houses about 2,000 youth in 10 secure, lockdown facilities. Most TYC secure facilities are well outside urban areas. In August 2010, Advocacy, Incorporated and Texas Appleseed wrote a 17-page letter to the US Department of Justice advising the department of "systemic problems in TYC secure facilities." The key problems cited were: (1) inability to ensure safety of youth, (2) inadequate mental health care, (3) lack of educational programming, (4) inadequate special educational programming and over-reliance on short-term security and lack of programming for youth in segregation.

Sources: Harris County JDAI July 2010 Newsletter; Press Releases from County Judge Ed Emmett; Annie E. Casey Foundation website <http://www.aecf.org/ourwork/juvenilejustice.aspx>; CHILDREN AT RISK Newsletter; August 24, 2010 letter to Judy Preston, USDJ.