

# **First Judicial District Mental Health Court Program**

Leaders in the First Judicial District created a new program to help keep children with mental health issues out of the out of the juvenile justice system. On March 6, 2008 the First Judicial District Mental Health Court Program held its first graduation ceremony for eight kids, and their families, who successfully completed the program. Modeled after a similar program in San Jose, California, the First Judicial District's Juvenile Mental Health Court is the first of its kind in Colorado and one of only seven in the U.S. The program is designed to divert certain kids with mental health issues out of the delinquency system and provide them and their families the help and resources they need.

In the Jefferson County Mental Health Court one juvenile probation officer supervises a maximum of 25 kids at any given time. That probation officer is partially funded with Senate Bill 94 funds which are designed to help reduce violent crime and recidivism in juveniles.

Kids with mental illness create a very unique and potentially dangerous problem. Often they aren't diagnosed or are misdiagnosed. They may begin breaking the law as they turn to illegal drugs in attempt to self-medicate. Desperate parents are often forced to resort to calling police on their out of control kids, who aren't really criminals, simply because they don't know where else to turn.

The First Judicial District Juvenile Mental Health Court is a collaborative effort between the Jefferson Center for Mental Health, the District Attorney, the courts, the probation department, the Public Defenders' Office, the Juvenile Assessment Center, Human Services, the school district, and the Rocky Mountain Children's Law Center. A member from each of these agencies makes up the mental health court's screening committee.

The participants in mental health court must have a diagnosed mental illness. Most of the kids currently in the program suffer from major depression and bi-polar disorders. Their ages range from 10 to 17.

The process begins with a referral which can be made by various people in the community who may have contact with kids with mental health issues. A comprehensive assessment of the child is completed and then each case is presented to the screening committee. The screening committee meets twice a month and must agree unanimously to accept a child into

the program. When determining if the child is a good candidate, the committee also considers the child's parents in an attempt to gauge their level of compliance. This program cannot be successful without everyone working together.

Once accepted into mental health court, kids are assigned one of two tracks that provide a maximum of one year supervision. If the kid successfully completes the terms and conditions imposed upon them in program, their case is dismissed.

All too often parents of kids with mental health issues become frustrated and overwhelmed with the problems their kids face and the impact it has on their entire family. Traditionally children with mental health issues make entry into the juvenile justice system because parents don't know how or where to get services on their own.

Kids cannot deal with these problems alone; their families need help understanding the problems and as well as resources to help make successful changes.

One of the major differences in the way this program operates versus traditional juvenile court is that there are frequent court reviews to follow the progress of the participant. Ordinarily, once a juvenile is in the delinquency system they don't see a magistrate again until there is a problem.

Kids and their parents will meet with the Jefferson Center for Mental Health to set up services and with probation to set the terms and conditions of their supervision. The mental health court requires that each child enters into a contract with the Probation Department and be supervised at the Intensive Supervision Probation (ISP) level. ISP includes much more frequent meetings with the probation officer than ordinary probation, as well as unannounced visits to home and school. The family has to agree to support the child and to the contract's conditions. They may also be required to participate in family counseling.

The Juvenile Mental Health Court is both incentive and sanction-based. The partner professionals working to make this program a success, give rewards for positive behavior. For negative behavior, the Magistrate might impose sanctions like sending them to Mountview for a weekend, or assigning them to a juvenile work crew, or writing a paper.

The First Judicial District Juvenile Mental Health Court is not always easy. It takes a commitment from the parents as well as the child. Mental illness is something the child, and their family, will deal with for the rest of their life. The mental health court is designed to help them through the problem areas, learn to keep problems and behavior under control well enough

to stay out of the adult system and also, hopefully, to find some life skills that give them a foot up in making their way in the world.

General information:

- First Judicial District Mental Health Court Program pilot case August 5, 2005
- First official case accepted into Mental Health Court on November 29, 2006.
- 52 successful completions, 8 unsuccessful
- 25 currently supervised by designated probation officer

**For more information, contact:**

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