

Grant to Iowa will aid juvenile justice efforts

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Iowa is embarking on a three-year project to improve its delivery of juvenile justice programs.

The effort comes with a federal grant and new tools for evaluating juvenile delinquency programs that aim to reduce the likelihood that young people will become repeat or hardened criminals.

The \$750,000 grant will provide training and technical help from the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention for improving services to young offenders.

The three-year program will be administered by the Iowa Department of Human Rights' Division of Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning. It will provide resources to three of Iowa's eight judicial districts, with the idea that the lessons learned will be disseminated statewide.

"This new project will bolster current work, allowing both CJJP and the field to be better informed as to which services are likely to achieve outcomes related to reduced recidivism, increased public safety and lower costs," said Paul Stageberg, the division's administrator, during Monday's meeting with justice system professionals from around the state to explain the grant.

The grant and the education process surrounding it come as juvenile justice has become a hot topic, particularly in Polk County. New CJJP data show big increases in detentions and delinquency charges for minority youths.

The advocacy group A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy has accused the county attorney's office of abandoning best practices for addressing juvenile misconduct, prompting County Attorney John Sarcone to dispute the CJJP data and accuse AMOS of "intentional misstatements" and "slander."

Iowa is one of three states to receive juvenile justice grants. Parts of northwest and northeast Iowa, including Sioux City, Iowa City, Cedar Rapids and Waterloo, are to be targeted.

The effort centers on a new score sheet that will be used to evaluate existing programs against similar approaches that research shows have had positive effects and reduced the potential for repeat offenses. The research underlying the score sheet suggests therapeutic responses to misconduct, such as counseling, are far more effective than punishment, such as incarceration.

Rating the effectiveness of programs at work in Iowa communities will aid social service and judicial officials in routing needy young people to the appropriate rehabilitation options, officials said.

"When I think about Iowa, and the 20 or so years that I've had experience with this state, I think you're a wonderful laboratory for moving this forward," said Shay Bilchik, director of the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University, who is advising the state on the new program.

Gov. Terry Branstad briefly addressed the group, emphasizing the potential for lessons learned in the pilot program to be expanded across the state.

“We won’t be just implementing new tools, we will be measuring the effectiveness of the tools in this project,” Branstad said. He added, “We want to increase public safety, reduce recidivism and lower the cost.”

Gary Niles, chief juvenile court officer for Iowa’s 3rd Judicial District in northwest Iowa, said the changes enabled by the grant could remake the state’s juvenile justice system. “We’re going to roll up our sleeves and we’re going to make this work and we’re going to have one of best systems in the United States when we’re all done,” he said.