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## Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court launching Mental Health Court Court aims to help youth avoid crime

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Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court Judge Kristin Sweeney has seen kids who probably wouldn't be in a courtroom if they weren't mentally ill.

Many times the child's family didn't recognize the illness.

Others didn't know how to get help.

Often, the parents ended up calling the police - the only response they know will be immediate.

In January, after years of planning, the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court will try to tackle the problem by opening its first Mental Health Court, to make sure kids get help rather than primarily focus on their crime.

The court's decision was bolstered, in part, by a study of more than 200 juveniles arrested and brought into the county detention center during the last five years.

The study found:

26 percent of males and 52 percent of females screened had a severe mood disorder, such as bipolar disorder or depression.

63 percent of the kids had had both a mental health and a substance abuse problem diagnosed.

The program will start small with 12 kids and Sweeney as its only judge.

It will also work closely with the Drug Court, because often kids have both problems.

The Mental Health Court will take in the kids whose mental illnesses probably spurred their drug use.

The Drug Court will continue to work with kids whose drug use is their primary problem.

Cuyahoga County's Mental Health Court is set up to keep kids with mental illness from getting a criminal record - if they get help.

Patrick Gardner, deputy director of the National Center for Youth Law, said that's the way it should be.

"From our perspective the point is diversion," he said. "You don't want it to be just a door into the mental health system but a door out of the juvenile justice system."

Gardner said it is important for courts to have child advocates and noncourt professionals involved in the program so children and their families know that help is available outside the criminal justice system.

For that part, the court is getting help from the Cuyahoga County Tapestry System of Care, an organization that can connect families and children with the services they need in their own neighborhoods.

Coordinators assigned to each child will connect kids and their families with resources in the community that they can rely on after their time in court is over -- and so they don't commit new crimes.

Sweeney said the pilot program will focus on kids who have severe mental illnesses, like bipolar disorder, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Youths charged with sex crimes and certain violent crimes will not be accepted. The program is voluntary, but to participate, the youths must admit they committed the crimes with which they have been charged.

Sweeney said many kids who fit the profile have been charged with domestic violence.

The judge said she will work with prosecutors to ensure public safety and with public defenders to ensure that juveniles' rights are upheld.

A team will form around the child and parents to help figure out what services they need, plan for any possible crisis and help the family seek out other support for the child, including teachers, coaches and pastors.

The intense program requires the kids to come to court every week at first. If the child is following rules, like taking medication and attending school regularly, those visits will taper off.

Sweeney, who also observed the problem of juvenile mental illness as a public defender, said the court is designed to recognize the lifelong implications of mental illness -- and that treating the young people will make the community safer.

Simply sending mentally ill kids through the system doesn't solve the problem. "The mental illness doesn't just go away," she said.

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