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Detention diversion project at risk

Youth program's funding slashed

By Maria Cramer, Globe Staff | November 9, 2009

For four years, hundreds of Boston children and teenagers picked up on charges such as assault and battery, robbery, and breaking and entering have been kept from incarceration and steered toward a community center in Roxbury.

There, they have met with advocates who try to make sure they stick to their court-ordered curfews, receive counseling, and participate in field trips that include horseback riding and tours of nearby colleges and universities.

The program, a roughly \$133,000-per-year initiative with a staff of three, was born in 2005 out of the concern that too many minority children and teenagers were being held in juvenile detention centers while they waited for their cases to be resolved in court. With its strict focus on rehabilitating children otherwise headed for lockup, it is the only program of its kind in Massachusetts, according to juvenile justice advocates. But soon it may be gone.

The federal funding that sustains the Detention Diversion Advocacy Project, which is administered by the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps, has been slashed in half. Unless the program can raise enough money, it could shut down by January, said Nichelle Sadler, Action Corps' area director. Action Corps is trying to identify private money or grants that could help keep the program afloat.

News of the project's possible demise is troubling, said Judge Leslie E. Harris, who presides over juvenile cases in Suffolk County and often refers children to the program.

"It is very painful to hear that they're talking about not keeping that program," Harris said. "They have hands-on 24-hour contact with the kids. This is an effective way of making sure these kids are never adjudicated at all."

Those who have gone through the program said they fear what will happen to teens who run into trouble with the law.

"It really makes me afraid," said Danniela Cruz, an 18-year-old high school junior in Jamaica Plain. She was connected with the program two years ago when she was charged with assault after getting in a fight at Ashmont Station. Her advocate, with whom she still

keeps in touch, helped her get into a smaller school and find a job at the Franklin Park Zoo.

“If there isn’t a program like DDAP when kids get in trouble, they’ll just get sent to jail,” Cruz said. “If I hadn’t been connected with the schools and the job . . . my case probably wouldn’t have been dropped.”

Federal and state funding cuts are threatening several youth programs aimed at steering teenagers and children from violence.

The Shannon grants, which focused on preventing gang violence, were slashed from \$13 million last year to \$4.5 million under Governor Deval Patrick’s latest budget cuts.

The diversion advocacy project’s funding came from federal dollars administered by the state’s Executive Office of Public Safety. But in July, at the beginning of the 2010 fiscal year, the funding was slashed by \$67,797, said Terrel Harris, spokesman for the office.

“It is sad that the funding had to be cut. Unfortunately, in these times it’s not uncommon,” he said. “We’re hoping it’s not going to be lost. We’re hoping that somehow, someday it’ll be saved.”

Since the program began, it has served 229 children between 11 and 17 years old who are charged with serious crimes but are not considered dangerous. It costs about \$2,100 a year per child to run the program, which assigns an advocate to work with a youth three to four times a week, according to the Action Corps. By contrast, it can cost an average of \$95,000 to detain a child at a Department of Youth Services facility for a year, according to state officials.

“DDAP is just a tiny fraction of the cost and has tremendous success and doesn’t subject the kids to some of the negative consequences of being detained,” said Lael Chester, executive director for Citizens for Juvenile Justice.

While DYS provides education at its facilities, detention means separation from families and potential introductions to gang members. Many youths who go to DYS, even for a week, will not return to school, often because they were already at risk of dropping out or are too embarrassed by the stigma of being detained.

“Kids begin to self-identify,” Chester said. “ ‘I’m shackled. I’m locked up. That’s who I am.’ ”

The number of children detained by DYS has dropped from 5,600 in 2006 to 4,500 in 2008, as overall crime rates have fallen and the state has explored more alternatives to detention. But Chester said the elimination of the diversion project could reverse much of this progress.

Harris, the juvenile court judge, said he is not sure what he will do if DDAP is eradicated.

“A lot of kids will be going to lockup because I won’t have alternatives,” he said.

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