

Learning to Fly: County Launches New Mental Health Court for Youths

By Daniel Burgess, Staff Writer

A new specialty court directed at juveniles with mental illnesses who are at higher risk of committing another crime is seeking to help young offenders and their families and to protect the public from crime.

Denton County Court at Law No. 1 Judge Kimberly McCary, along with staff at the Juvenile Probation Department, described the new juvenile mental health court, called Soar, at a presentation Thursday night at Emily Fowler Central Library in Denton. The National Alliance on Mental Illness Denton County hosted the presentation.

The county is calling the program Soar, but McCary said it's not an acronym — it means whatever the kids believe it means. The court itself is an intensive, phased six-month program that places a high level of accountability on the juvenile participants. It provides access to outside counseling and therapy to those who could not otherwise afford it and ensures the parents are part of the child's rehabilitation.

"What we do is we really target the kids that are on the higher level of risk and need. And we want to keep them in the community instead of place them," said Laura Prillwitz, deputy director of the Denton County Juvenile Probation Department.

Placement is when offenders are assigned to a residential facility or a lockdown detention center. The high-risk kids are the ones who are likely to have their probation revoked and get placed in a facility, Prillwitz said. When they get out, the cycle often starts over again.

"We're removing them from the home, then we're putting them right back in the home after they complete placement, and then we're

right back to the same recidivistic behavior," juvenile probation Officer Shannon Ward said. "And so I was beating my head up against the wall as a probation officer thinking, 'What can we do differently?'"

"It's not just the kids that are affected," McCary said. "Mom and/or Dad are probably at their wits' end trying to deal with this. We tell them that we are a partner in your child's success. We're not telling you what to do because we think we know better or because you've done wrong."

McCary said three-fourths of youths in the juvenile justice system have serious mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress, depression, and mood disorders that often are induced by psychological trauma.

"We want to remove that stigma," McCary said. "I don't want you, quite frankly, to look at all my kids as just juvenile delinquents."

The court was approved to receive grant funding of \$200,000 per year for four years from the Texas Juvenile Justice Department and the court was launched in November. It is a collaboration of County Court at Law No. 1, the Juvenile Probation Department, the Denton County District Attorney's Office and local defense attorneys. The court was approved by Denton County commissioners and the Texas governor's office.

Participants must meet with their probation officer at least twice



DRC/Daniel Burgess
Judge Kimberly McCary of Denton County Court at Law No. 1 gives a presentation Thursday night on the county's new juvenile mental health court at Emily Fowler Central Library in Denton.

per week and attend court twice per month. Those doing well are rewarded with accolades, less restrictive curfews, and other incentives. Participants who are not meeting the requirements may have incentives removed, have to repeat a phase, or be placed in a facility or detention center. The court's goal is for the juveniles to successfully complete the program and rejoin the community.

All but those accused of sex offences are eligible for consideration for the court, and the district attorney's office alone determines whether a case will go to Soar. Of the hundreds of children in the Denton County juvenile justice system, no more than 10 will be in the new court at a time.

"We're looking at the ones who have serious issues going on. And we want to give them the intense experience and intense program to help them. That's what we have created here," Prillwitz said. "With a program this intense, if you have more than 10, you're going to burn out, and you're not going to be effective."

Anyone interested in applying for the court can fill out the referral form on the Juvenile Mental Health Court page at www.dentoncounty.com.

