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6 Counties To Screen Youth Offenders For Mental Illness

(AP) As many as half of the boys and girls in Indiana's juvenile detention centers have mental illnesses, but some will be diverted into counseling and other programs under a pilot project in six counties beginning in January.

The Indiana State Bar Association announced Thursday that six of the state's 22 local juvenile detention centers — those in Bartholomew, Clark, Johnson, Lake, Marion and Porter counties — will begin screening youths entering their facilities under a pilot program that's being embraced by judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, doctors and public policy makers.

The goal is to remove from the juvenile justice system those youths whose troubles with the law can be attributed to depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or other maladies. Instead, they would receive treatment that might include counseling or medication or both.

If they don't receive treatment or other appropriate services, such children risk longer periods behind bars, higher rates of later arrests and problems getting along in society, the bar association said.

"The whole goal behind juvenile justice is not to punish kids, it's to treat them," said JauNae Hanger, an Indianapolis attorney who has led the screening initiative for the state bar.

Screening also can identify very troubled youths who need treatment before their actions lead to tragic consequences, said Paje Felts, a lobbyist for the attorneys group. She pointed to the case of Virginia Tech gunman Seung-Hui Cho, whom courts found mentally ill and in need of hospitalization more than a year before he killed 32 people and committed suicide on April 16.

"If you capture these kids now, you won't have those tragedies occur," Felts said.

A 2004 survey by the private nonprofit Indiana Juvenile Justice Task Force projected half the children in Indiana's juvenile justice system needed some psychiatric care, including more than a quarter who suffered hallucinations, delusions or feelings of alienation. The survey examined 359 youths ages 8 to 19 in 13 detention centers across the state.

Jim Higdon, superintendent of the Johnson County Juvenile Detention Center south of Indianapolis, said some youths passing through his 48-bed facility have done nothing more than act out by skipping school or misbehaving.

"This is going to be a good deal because it's going to identify a lot of kids that don't belong here," said Higdon, president of the Indiana Juvenile Detention Association, which represents the state's 22 local detention centers, which altogether have about 1,150 beds. "It's been needed very badly."

Some screening already occurs, but there is no systematic statewide process. Juvenile court judges have considerable discretion to order mental evaluations, said Steve Johnson, executive director of the Indiana Prosecuting Attorneys Council.

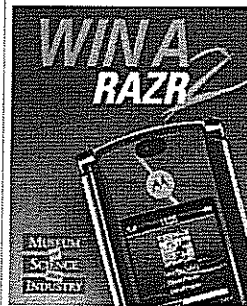
In Porter County, which began screening in 2005, the results are encouraging, said Circuit Judge Mary Harper, who chairs an advisory board for the pilot project. About 50 youths have been diverted into treatment, and of the 11 who successfully completed their diversion programs, none have gotten into trouble with the law again, she said.

However, not all parents have cooperated with the diversion program, Harper said. Some have mental health issues of their own, while others prefer not to have their sons and daughters labeled as having a mental illness.

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"They consider it a scourge," Harper said.

It will take several years for screening to reach all juvenile detention centers in Indiana. In Pennsylvania, which the Indiana bar has used as a model, it has taken seven years for 21 of that state's 23 detention centers to implement mental health screening, Hanger said.

"We're in this for the long term," she said. "We really want to see this pilot project grow into a state initiative."

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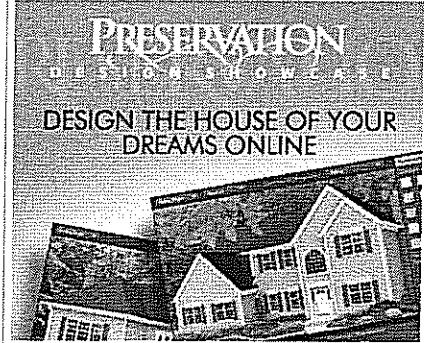
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