June 2017

Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative

It’s 10 p.m. on a Saturday night. A 13-year-old is either delinquent or in need of protection. What tools are available for law enforcement with regard to placing that youth somewhere? Are there better options than secure detention for the child?

That’s what Summit County is working to address. The county has been part of a Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) grant since 2009 to ensure that only the right youth are placed into secure detention and others are receiving less restrictive services.

Developed 25 years ago by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, JDAI is a national juvenile justice reform model that aims to reduce inappropriate and unnecessary use of secure detention and promotes changes to detention policies, practices and programs.

Ohio is a state JDAI site with Cuyahoga, Franklin, Lucas, Montgomery and Summit Counties first participating as county sites. The initiative expanded in 2014 to include Mahoning, Marion and Trumbull Counties and expanded again this year to include Ashtabula and Warren Counties. The original five sites, which launched in 2010, reduced detention admissions by 44% from 2009 to 2016.

“Investing in detention alternatives is an investment in Ohio’s future,” said Regina Lurry, State JDAI Administrator. “Every time we’re able to keep a youth successfully out of detention, we’re preventing that young person from going deeper into the juvenile justice system. This works in conjunction with other efforts to ultimately have less youth end up at DYS.”

Lisa DiSabato-Moore is the Special Programs Administrator for the Summit County Juvenile Court. She explained that when the county first became involved in JDAI, it examined its use of detention and found that about half of the time, youth were placed into detention for domestic violence-related issues rather than delinquency.

The court committed to using research-based placement tools for making decisions as well as what the Casey foundation refers to as the “My Child Test,” meaning staff ask themselves what they would want for the youth if he or she were their own child.

During a recent JDAI meeting in Summit County, representatives from the court, police department, prosecutor’s office, public defender’s office, Summit County ADM Board (Alcohol, Drug Addiction & Mental Health Services), and domestic violence shelter were reviewing the youth currently detained in detention. After closer examination of a 13-year-old who had been
charged with assault after 1 of the 8 children left in her care had been injured, the team concurred that the 13-year-old herself was a victim in the situation. They found her in a situation beyond what she could reasonably handle. As a result, they petitioned the magistrate, who granted placement in a shelter where the young teen was connected to community resources to address her needs.

“To assure public safety, there are times when incarceration is the appropriate action in cases involving serious offenses,” said Judge Teodosio. “However, I firmly believe a more measured approach is needed when dealing with delinquent and unruly behavior when public safety is not threatened.”

Summit County has reduced its detention population by 49% from 2009, the base year of JDAI participation, to 2016.

In addition to JDAI efforts, a total of $1.8 million was allocated by DYS last year to support detention alternatives and enhancements statewide. The focus was reserving detention placement for the right youth, addressing challenges of youth early, and improving detention services and conditions of confinement. Approximately 5,000 youth benefitted from the alternatives and enhancements in a total of 27 counties.

“We’re all here to do what is best for the youth and community safety,” Tony Panzino, Bureau Chief of Courts and Community Services said. “Detention alternatives help us do just that.”