

Partners for Youth – City of Tyler, Texas Municipal Court

Problem Assessment

Of those adults who still have juvenile cases pending in the Tyler Municipal Court, one out of three have spent time in the Smith County Jail and 10 are currently in the penitentiary. From August 2005 through August 2006, over 2,100 cases were filed in the Tyler Municipal Court in which the defendants were juveniles. Of those, more than 280 were alcohol-related and more than 800 were Class “C” misdemeanors such as assault, theft and possession of drug paraphernalia. The large number of repeat cases and the escalation of juvenile offenders to adult offenders prompted the Court administrator to create a program to help keep juveniles out of trouble – ***Partners for Youth***.

Under the “old law,” Municipal Courts had limited ability to address juvenile offenses. However, in 2006 the Texas Legislature gave courts the authority to create a juvenile program and fund the salaries of the personnel involved through the collection of a juvenile program fee. It is pursuant to this new authority that the Tyler Municipal Court has joined in partnerships with organizations and individuals in the Tyler community to offer juveniles an alternative to just “paying a fine.”

Program Implementation and Costs

The only program of its kind, ***Partners for Youth*** is designed to offer counseling, education and punishment to juvenile offenders in an effort to prevent them from re-offending. Juveniles charged with an offense in the City of Tyler’s Municipal Court, and who plead guilty or not contest, may participate in the program.

After review of pertinent information about the child including prior criminal history and the nature and seriousness of the offense, the judge will determine which classes will be best suited for the child's needs. The offender must complete the courses as a condition of probation.

The *Partners for Youth* program has partnered with several community agencies to proactively address juvenile delinquency by offering offenders the opportunity to participate in educational courses. These courses benefit not only the juveniles and their families who are participants, but the entire community by decreasing the likelihood that the participants will become repeat offenders. The courses offered to juvenile offenders through the *Partners for Youth* program include:

- *Alcohol Prevention/Awareness Courses* – This six hour state-approved course is designed to address issues concerning the use of alcoholic beverages. It is taught by licensed chemical dependency counselors and is required on all alcohol related offenses.
- *Tobacco Prevention/Awareness Course* – This six hour state-approved course addresses topics related to juvenile use of tobacco and its harmful effects. It is taught by licensed chemical dependency counselors and is required on all tobacco-related offenses.
- *Theft/Shoplifting Prevention and Awareness Course* – Theft cases among juveniles are on the rise. This home-study “shoplifting” course is required on all theft cases and is monitored by the Municipal Court staff.
- *Teen Court* – This program meets each Monday evening and gives the unique opportunity to have teens assess the punishment of other teens. The punishment includes community service hours as well as working as a staff member of the Teen Court. Teen Court provides a “first-stop” intervention program for first time juvenile offenders that do not require counseling.

- *Parent's Anonymous* – This 10 week program meets two hours per week and focuses on topics such as goal setting, anger management, teen pregnancy, communication skills and conflict avoidance.
- *The Andrews Center* – This four week course meets one hour a week and has been designed specifically for the *Partners for Youth* program. It addresses behavioral issues and developing cognitive skills. It is taught by crisis intervention specialists.
- *Mothers Against Drunk Driving* – This four-hour victim impact panel is sponsored by MADD and allows juvenile alcohol offenders the opportunity to interact with victims of alcohol-related crimes.
- *ADAPT* – The **A**dolescent **D**evelopment and **A**chievement **P**rogram of **T**yler is a non-profit agency that provides after-school homework and educational assistance. They also provide each child with a hot meal as well as providing meal assistance to families.
- *Courtroom and Emergency Room Observations* – Facilitated by Assistant City Attorney Deborah Pullum, the program puts youth in direct contact with those facing the real life consequences of their actions.
- *Adult Support Groups* – These groups are facilitated by a licensed counselor for drug and alcohol issues by Parent's Anonymous for juvenile and family issues.
- *Alcohol and Drug Counseling* – Provided by a licensed counselor, this one-on-one program will allow individuals and families to receive personalized counseling for drug and/or alcohol related issues.
- *Family Counseling* – These groups are facilitated by a licensed counselor who provides counseling for families/parents on a variety of topics related to juveniles.

- *SCCADA* – The **S**ister **C**ommunities **C**ouncil on **A**lcohol and **D**rug **A**buse provides a coordinated approach to the prevention, education and intervention of substance abuse through targeted programs and services delivered in school and community settings.

The ***Partners for Youth*** program is constantly changing as new community partnerships become available. The newest additions to the program are:

- *Talking Back* – Juveniles chosen from the Parents Anonymous Class meet with a panel of City leaders to discuss their concerns and thoughts on how to make the City of Tyler a better place. The goal of Talking Back is to teach participants not to focus on changing the future, but on changing the now.
- *Support Group* – The Support Group will be offered to juveniles who have successfully completed the ***Partners for Youth*** program to ensure that they have the support they need to stay out of trouble in the future.
- *Adult Classes* – ***Partners for Youth*** will soon start classes exclusively for parents to teach them how to effectively deal with their children’s problems and help keep them out of trouble.

In August 2006, the Tyler City Council approved the budget of \$90,818 for ***Partners for Youth***. The budget funds include the salary and benefits of the ***Partners for Youth*** coordinator and two support staff positions. The overall cost to a participant varies but includes a \$60 program fee plus payment of court costs, which range between \$60 and \$130. All court costs are remitted to the State of Texas and all program fees are spent exclusively to provide this program to the community. Once the child successfully completes the course and probation, the charge filed against them will be dismissed.

Tangible Results or Measurable Outcomes

In October 2006, the Tyler Municipal Court began enrolling juvenile offenders in the ***Partners for Youth*** program and signing them up for classes. The first ***Partners for Youth*** classes began in January 2007. During the first year, 2,233 children were assigned to classes offered through the ***Partners for Youth*** program. The first year ended successfully with a 69 percent completion rate with 1,542 children completing the assigned classes and other probation requirements. Data analysis to statistically measure the program's lasting impact are ongoing. Current results indicate a profound impact on the community.

Many juveniles who have completed the Program have written letters to the Court expressing their thanks for being given the opportunity to overcome their problems or addictions. These students realize that without receiving this help they could possibly spend the rest of their lives in and out of courts and jails as repeat offenders.

Lessons Learned

The ***Partners for Youth*** program has demonstrated the power of collaboration with the community and the importance of leveraging existing resources. ***Partners for Youth*** has also created a convergence of all community resources in a programmatic, understandable format that allows each agency to allocate their resources in a way that will provide the biggest impact. By investing in Tyler's youth, ***Partners for Youth*** has created a shifting paradigm to stop the escalation of criminal behavior through proactive intervention. In short, this program is critical to building a healthy future for the community.