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Juvenile probation offers programs, counseling

By REBECCA DIMEO
Reporter

Juvenile probation offers more than an occasional talk with a probation officer. It includes a host of programs for the young people on probation. Janet McNutt, a Brazos County juvenile probation officer for four years, heads the counseling unit for those on probation. Counseling is one of the main functions of a juvenile probation officer.

"It's a lot different working with kids," she says. "You're working with family and you're working with schools. The issues are different."

McNutt and 10 other juvenile probation officers currently handle the approximately 125 juveniles, ages 10 to 17, on probation in Brazos County.

"As probation officers, the

two things we are mandated by law to do are to protect the community and protect the child," McNutt says.

In fulfilling its responsibilities, the probation department provides group counseling, community work projects, restitution, a volunteer program and a status offender program.

In group counseling, topics such as job interviewing, peer pressure, drug and alcohol abuse, and family and school difficulties are covered weekly for the older juveniles on probation.

Community work efforts to help beautify local parks use the probationers to pick up litter, cut weeds and plant flowers. Restitution is paid by the juvenile and his family as a way for the probationer to realize the financial responsibility involved

in theft or damage of property.

Individuals and organizations volunteer time and services as tutors or adult role models based on the Big Brother and Big Sister programs.

The status offender program is an attempt to keep juveniles referred to the department for status offenses — skipping school or running away from home — out of the court process.

Other programs aimed to keep juveniles referred for minor offenses out of the courts and off probation are the shoplifting diversion program and informal adjustment.

The shoplifting diversion program is a one-time seminar for juveniles caught stealing items worth less than \$5. Informal adjustment offers a chance for the child and parents to

agree that they will try the conditions of probation for six months.

Lengths of probation vary depending on the offense, but all probation periods ordered by the court last for a year and may be renewed year-by-year until the juvenile's 18th birthday.

From her experience as a probation officer, McNutt cites education and community involvement as the keys to rehabilitation of juvenile offenders, who are recommended for probation mostly from the schools.

Peer pressure and boredom are the reasons juveniles get into trouble, she says.


"Probation is not here to punish and scare and make kids fear the system," she says. "Scaring children is not an effective way to create change."

McNutt says she tries to individualize the program for each probationer as much as possible, but she doesn't want to make it sound too informal.

"This isn't a service kids seek out," she says. "They're on probation because they've been in trouble."

McNutt says community services and resources are lacking because of the structure of the community — two cities side by side. This structure leads to a duplication of services while others, like a mass transit system, are non-existent.

She says the lack of mass transit keeps the juvenile probation officers from finding jobs for probationers who need them for the money, either for family reasons or to make the restitution that may be part of probation.



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Aggies tutoring youth in trouble

By RENEE HARRELL
Reporter

The Brazos County Juvenile Probation Department is recruiting Texas A&M students to help tutor young people who have been placed on probation.

The probation department has solicited tutors from 35 campus organizations.

Response to the request has been encouraging. Phi Eta Sigma, the freshman honor society, has had about six members volunteer.

"These kids need someone to look up to," Charlotte Taylor, Texas A&M student development specialist said. "The college students will act as a role model for the juveniles."

The juvenile department has been matching probated juve-

niles with volunteer tutors from the community and Texas A&M for two years.

Janet McNutt, administrator of programs and training at the juvenile department, also said a role model for the youth is a good idea.

"The role model idea is really a separate aspect of our program from the tutoring, but it does play a part when college students are involved," McNutt said.

"However, the college students must be dedicated enough to stick with it. Just because a big exam is coming up doesn't mean the student is excused from his tutoring duties," McNutt said.

Melinda Thompson, juvenile probation officer is in charge of


the tutoring program.

"I will go over the all of the legalities with the college students," Thompson said. "We hope they establish a relationship with the juveniles that will benefit both of them. The juveniles will be able to see someone who might have overcome some problems too and has gone on to further his education."

The tutors will be trained on a monthly program before they start tutoring. They have a choice to tutor math, English, history or science and must tutor for a minimum of one hour per week for eight weeks.

The tutors and juveniles will be paired according to who has transportation and where it is convenient to meet.

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