

CHOICES

for families

Truancy program aims to reclaim kids

“Our kids are not disposable!” This conviction by a number of community leaders and organizations is what’s behind a new citywide partnership to “Erase Truancy.”

Combining funds from the Skillman Foundation, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Mayor’s Time Youth Programs, the Wayne County Prosecutor’s Office, the Family Court and Detroit Public Schools, the community is making a united effort to keep students in school by attacking chronic truancy and substituting it with ways to engage youth to become productive, contributing citizens.

Per the program staff, 131 youths ages 6-16 are referred to the Prosecutor’s office every month. This is only a small portion of the youth chronically truant from the local schools but resources are limited. To stop this trend, schools now report excessive truantries to court liaisons. A hearing is scheduled with youth and parent/guardians.

The JAC provides a pre-hearing screening for each youth. The prosecutor uses it to determine the circumstances surrounding particular truantries. Based on what has been learned from youth and parents already screened, it is clear that too many of them are disconnected from their local communities and have few parental supports.

The staff of “Erase Truancy” takes on case management for chronically

truant students, prepares them for hearings and connects them with local services and volunteer groups after the hearing. They are then offered a wide array of youth programs; local churches provide volunteers to work directly with truant youths and their families.

“Excessive truancy is a precursor to juvenile delinquency.”

--Robert Heimbuch

Says one official, acknowledging how important youth are to the community, “We want to reconnect them before the streets capture them and rob us of their futures.”

“Erase Truancy” is an early intervention and prevention effort. Believing that criminality will fester if we don’t deal with truantries, the legal, law enforcement and service communities have beefed up their efforts to enforce the laws that require school attendance.

Wayne County Prosecutor Kim Worthy has spearheaded an initiative entitled “Change the Culture” that targets reducing violence in the community.

Robert Heimbuch, chief of the Juvenile Division, Wayne County Prosecutor’s Office, says an important component of their program heavily addresses truancy:

“Excessive truancy is a precursor to juvenile delinquency. A parent that has a chronically truant child should immediately sit up and take notice. We see it in a lot of these cases. Our partnership with “Erase Truancy” is very important.

It represents the prosecutor’s belief that the laws must be followed and acknowledges her commitment to use the Office’s unique role to enforce the law and get the attention of chronically truant youth and their parents.”

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Ulferts lends business, academic experience

BOARD PROFILE



Dr. Gregory Ulferts is professor of Decision and Systems Science and former dean of the College of Business Administration at the University of Detroit/Mercy. With an active 35-year career in the academic, business, civic and service communities both locally and internationally, Dr. Ulferts is another welcome addition to the Juvenile Assessment Center's Community Advisory Board.

"We are dealing with young people with serious needs," Dr. Ulferts explained when asked why he agreed to provide his advice and counsel to the JAC.

"We adults need to reinforce and reaffirm the original vision of Wayne County's human investment system so that our youth can thrive and grow."

Dr. Ulferts knows about systems and how they can fail over time if stakeholders forget their original purpose. He wants to help the JAC team concentrate on its mission and be more assertive in promoting its successes by providing factual data that shows how strong and effective the new system is.

"We need to reach out to make sure our direction is the one best able to serve young people," he says. "We need to do more to remind people why we are here and what we're doing, and then let the true facts drive our message."

As a member of the JAC Advisory Board, Dr. Ulferts wants to help open up better ways for people in Wayne County to discover how their children and their communities are better with the county's JAC/CMO human investment system. He believes this message has to be expanded beyond the traditional

print media by sharing information through alternative media like television, radio and the Internet, and by letting the young people and parents who've experienced the benefits tell their story. Such communication will strengthen and reaffirm all stakeholders' investment and commitment to the system's mission.

Since he's joined the advisory board, Dr. Ulferts says he has come to recognize "the admirable, competent talent of the JAC leadership and management team. They actively work very hard to

make the system do what it is supposed to; they use factual data to drive the system; and they continue to reach out to make sure our direction is the best way to serve young people."

A father of five children, Dr. Ulferts is

committed to helping the JAC identify and work toward a common vision for serving the youth and families of Wayne County in partnership with local and county units of government. Cynthia Smith, JAC CEO, says that his advice and deep professional experience are already enhancing the competency and focus of her management team.

"Greg is a welcome, committed professional and we have already learned a lot from him," she notes. ■

Editor's Note:

To stay close to the communities it serves and to assure accountability for carrying out its mission, the JAC is guided by a voluntary advisory board of experienced, knowledgeable, local citizens. In this issue we introduce another member of this board.

"We need to reach out to make sure our direction is the one best able to serve young people."

--Dr. Gregory Ulferts

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Capitated rates encourage early intervention

A core element of Wayne County's Child and Family Services' human investment system is to help support families become whole again and at the same time do it in efficient, cost-effective ways. The work focuses on both juvenile behavior and neglectful and abusive home situations.

Because fewer and fewer dollars are available to do everything that needs to be done, the new system has devised a method to target and spend its valuable dollars--capitation. A "capitated rate" assigns a specific amount of service to address a carefully diagnosed clinical condition or issue. The JAC then plays a key "front door" role for delinquent, abused/neglected youths and their families by providing the diagnosis.

The JAC's professional clinical staff is the first to face an adjudicated juvenile and family. They start by quickly and carefully identifying the presenting problems and then isolating the ones that pose the most urgent need for attention. Their recommendations, given to the CMOs, become the basic map for immediate work with the youth and family. By preventing repetitive, overlapping clinical analyses and by pinpointing the key problems for resetting the rules for productive behavior and specific services by youth and families, CMO staff can get started right away. The money and time saved by depending on a single, uniform JAC assessment are then better used to purchase services.

Because capitation will spend limited funds only for specifically approved services, it encourages early intervention and the creation of preventive approaches to problem-solving. By assuring that youth and families get services closer to home and more quickly, it enables better use of local services. It is also the least disruptive to the family and youth, and encourages them to make use

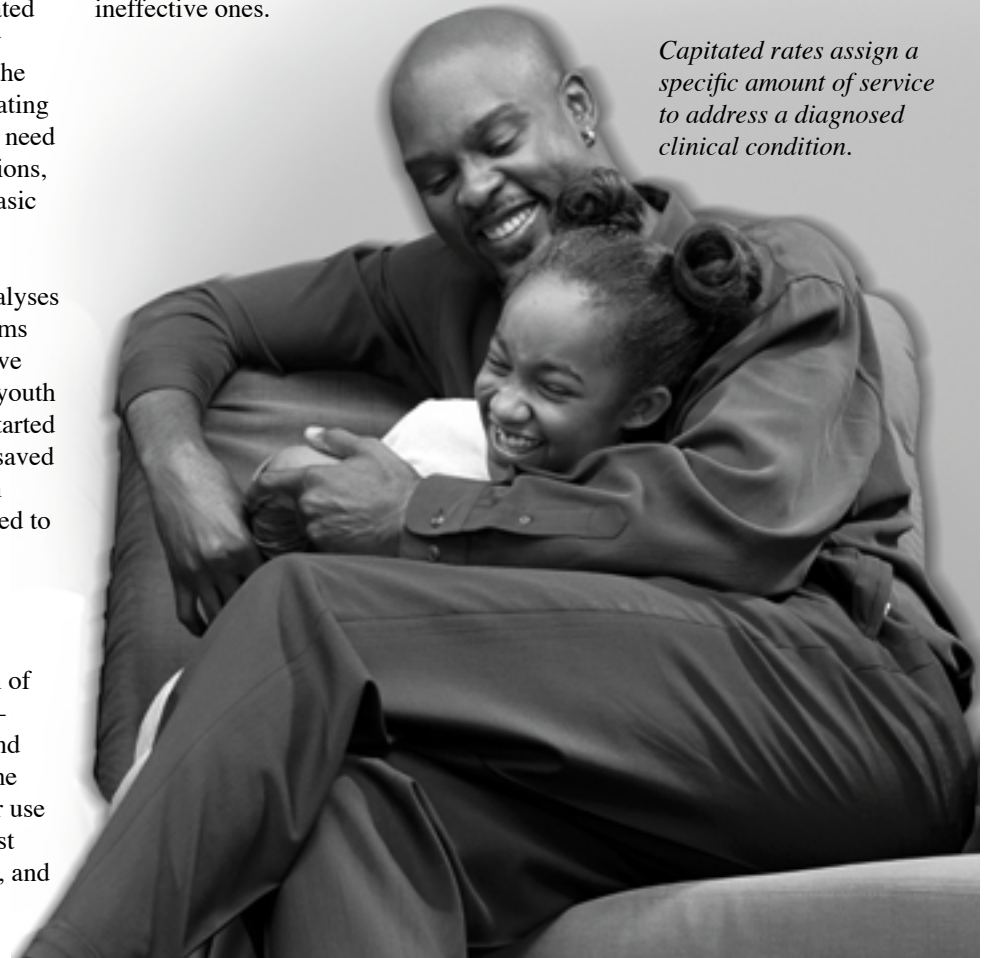
of available resources in order to stay or return home.

Capitation is more than a dollar management tool. It involves ongoing review of services to make sure treatment plans are carried out effectively and are producing the results intended. The pressure on the service networks is a legitimate expectation that they will deliver what they promise to families and youth in desperate need of new direction and focused attention. It also brings a secondary benefit to the service network because it measures and reports what works and what doesn't. As a result, practitioners are more able to adjust what they are doing by using proven approaches and discarding ineffective ones.

The review process is a central feature of the JAC Therapeutic Services. It coordinates with the providers who've been assigned court-ordered treatment responsibilities.

The dual goal of spending dollars more carefully and assuring more appropriate results is the key to the ultimate success of all early intervention and prevention programs. The JAC clinicians and CMO case managers, working together on one carefully defined road map, can get to core issues and productive solutions sooner. The results over the past four years prove that this methodology is reliably reclaiming more Wayne County youth because it is putting out small bonfires before they become raging forest fires. ■

Capitated rates assign a specific amount of service to address a diagnosed clinical condition.



Reasons behind truancy sought

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The citywide effort is having positive results. Many parents, particularly of middle and high school age kids, welcome the help. Oftentimes, they've hit a wall with their youngster and view the prosecutor, court and community agencies as agents to help them remove this wall. On the other hand, for parents who are not involved or not paying attention, being ordered to a hearing is a wake-up call – with consequences.

“Erase Truancy” is also helping school truant officers. They are getting more concrete help to deal not only with truant behavior but also with the reasons behind it. Beginning in January 2005, church volunteers will provide personal follow-up and help youth connect with positive neighborhood services so they can find ways to be successful in the neighborhood. The purpose is to teach them how to carry the success with them by going back to school.

Getting kids back into school quicker, assessing the variety of personal issues that may be discouraging school attendance, following their progress when they return to school, working with schools to support learning needs, and getting their parents to support attendance are the practical deeds being accomplished by the special partnership to “Erase Truancy.” By refusing to believe there are any throwaway kids, the community is making a strong, unified effort to reclaim and salvage the future for kids before they dig deeper and deeper holes for themselves. ■

Access to mental health services critical to successful youth treatment

A 2004 study completed by Hodges, Xue, Wotring, Pettee and Gilster, compared delinquent and non-delinquent youth receiving community mental health services. It concluded that while a large number of children and adolescents need effective mental health services, delinquent youth are significantly more likely to need such services because they are more likely to exhibit systems of mental illness than non-delinquent youth. At the same time, they are less likely to benefit from treatment services because they tend to have impairments across several areas in their lives, such as school, home and behavior toward others.

For four years now, Juvenile Assessment Center clinical staff has seen the same things. They have recognized that a considerable number of delinquent youth have:

- **histories that include abuse or neglect**
- **witnessed domestic violence**
- **been physically, sexually or emotionally abused by a caretaker**
- **been neglected during their growing up years.**

For youth who are already struggling with a mental illness, piling on any of these additional circumstances compounds their problems and frequently increases their likelihood of delinquent behavior. They are less able to cope, and more likely to reach a breaking point.

Recent 2004 data collected by the JAC indicates that of 775 assessed delinquent youth:

- **90.2 percent have been diagnosed with a behavior disorder**
- **11.2 percent have been diagnosed with adjustment disorders (primarily as a result of abuse or violence in the home)**
- **9.3 percent are diagnosed with depression**

- **2.7 percent have Bipolar Disorder and/or Intermittent Explosive Disorder**
- **1.3 percent have been diagnosed with a psychotic disorder.**

Acting as the gateway for Wayne County juveniles, the JAC assessments outline each youth's mental and other health needs and also provide detailed treatment recommendations.

The recommendations are used by the assigned Care Management Organizations to obtain treatment services and monitor the youth's progress during treatment.

Because delinquent youth often face a bigger combination of problems, making progress is more difficult for them. Improving earlier access to mental health services, however, would be a first step in making such treatment more likely to succeed. It would be governed by the same premise as all other services -- earlier intervention is more effective and has to be one of the next steps the county takes to improve



Delinquent youth face a multitude of problems needing mental health care.

its human investment service. Not only will it prove as cost effective as the present system; it will become an important new tool to treat juveniles earlier and produce more successful results. ■