

# Agency's job here complex

Joint office works  
with area's juveniles

By KIMBERLY BRANDT  
Decatur County commissioners learned what Northwest Kansas Juvenile Services does for area youths during a meeting last month.

The agency works with kids who have gotten in trouble with the law. Peggy Pratt, director of the service, said this year, the numbers have been lower than normal. She said one reason is because when a kid goes through juvenile intake, he or she is given some options before coming into custody of the service.

Mrs. Pratt said people often think she works for the state Juvenile Justice Authority, but actually the authority contracts with the regional agency and the counties it serves.

Mrs. Pratt said one of her main jobs is monitoring nine grants which the service has, including big brother/big sister programs, prevention grants and others.

In her office on the third floor of the courthouse, Mrs. Pratt said, she audits case files too. During an audit, she examines the cases, looking at what the case managers are doing to try to get the kids back to their homes and many other areas.

She said one of the biggest misconceptions is that if a child is placed somewhere, then they will be fixed. Mrs. Pratt said if a child is placed in foster care or a detention facility, she said, they aren't fixed. Programs have to be implemented to help them.

Commissioner Ralph Unger asked where they are being placed, if the juveniles are put in Sappa Valley Youth Ranch or the juvenile facility in WaKeeney?

Mrs. Pratt said they can place kids at Sappa Valley, which has a more home-like setting, but the authority doesn't normally use detention centers for placement. She said some kids go to Pratt Achievement Place or Boot Hill in Dodge City, which both have individual living. There are 30 centers in the state.

Mr. Unger asked how many levels of homes there are. Mrs. Pratt said the most lenient is the foster home, but they are very unlikely to place children in them. Then there is a level 4 type, a level 5, which is what Sappa Valley Youth Ranch is, and a level 6 which the juvenile has to have mental health issues to be placed in. WaKeeney is a detention center and there are also juvenile correction facilities in Larned and Beloit.

All juveniles who come through the intake process are not placed somewhere, she said; there are alternatives. One option the offender has is to go through a diversion program which Barry Richards of Oberlin works on. Called the Byrne Program, it is run under a grant from the state.

A kid can work the program if they have had prior problems with the law, she said. It lasts 90 days and includes 20 hours of community service. The community service hours can increase, said Mr. Richards, if the child doesn't complete the first set by a certain date.

While they are on the program, Mr. Richards checks in on the juvenile and law officers do random checks on them. For instance, she said, the curfew for junior high students is 8 p.m. and high school is 10 p.m. An officer can stop by the offender's home and see if they are there.

The kids also have random drug and alcohol testing. Mr. Richards said they are tested when entering the program in front of their parents. He said often the parents will say their is no way the kid is doing drugs or drinking and then they see the test come up positive.

In the 90-day program, the offender has to write a letter of apology to the victim of his/her crime and then deliver the letter in person and apologize. The offender also has to work off any of the money they may owe to the victim.

Commissioner Doyle Brown asked if the parents could just write a check for what the kid owes. Mr. Richards said the program is set up so the juvenile has to find a job and use money from their paychecks. If they are too young to work, he said, he works out a payment plan at home where the juvenile still has to work for the money.

Kids from 11 to 18 can enter the program.

"If they don't complete the program, they are charged with the original offense," he said.

Juveniles can enter the program for a variety of crimes, including minor in possession, arson, runaways and even domestic violence.

In Decatur County, since January 2000, Mr. Richards has had 16 boys and seven girls in the program. He said he also works with Graham, Norton, Osborne, Phillips and Smith counties.

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in Goodland