

Official may lead public, private plans for juveniles

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TAMPA - Hillsborough sheriff's officials are talking about setting up a program to reach young people who repeatedly have trouble with the law.

And the man who might direct the program is, at the same time, trying to establish a private program that would target some of the same group of young people.

The programs would have different goals. The sheriff's program would operate as an information bank or referral service; the other as a treatment program. Yet some of the same young people could be referred from one to the other, according to Sgt. Gordon Davis.

Davis, who heads the sheriff's juvenile operations unit, would run both.

He says there would be no conflict of interest. His own program would be strictly non-profit, he says, and none of the directors, including himself, will receive salaries.

There are two other reasons why a conflict of interest would never arise, says Undersheriff John Kirk.

The first: "You would have to know Sgt. Davis. He is not going to do anything that will endanger the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office." The second: Any potential conflict of interest would be reviewed by the state Ethics Commission.

The sheriff's office plans to check with the Ethics Commission to see whether Davis' dual role would pose a conflict.

The sheriff's program is still just a concept. It is part of a program called SHOCAP, the Serious Habitual Offender Comprehensive Action Program, which is sponsored by the U.S. Justice Department. It is designed to single out repeat juvenile offenders so they can be referred to treatment programs.

Davis' program, called STEP, or Steps to Encourage Progress, would actually offer treatment for young drug or alcohol addicts, some of whom may have gotten into trouble with the law.

"It could happen" that some of the juveniles identified by the sheriff's office would be placed in the private program, Davis said.

Davis is a strong supporter of the SHOCAP program, which he sees as an innovative way of dealing with young people who repeatedly break the law. Only a few agencies across the nation have adopted SHOCAP programs, he said. Among them are sheriff's offices in Duval County and in Oxnard, Calif.

SHOCAP would provide a record of juveniles who, because they have committed a number of crimes, seem destined for a life of crime. It would speed up court dates for those juveniles, Davis said. This is important, he said, because some chronic offenders commit more crimes in the six months or more they often have to wait for trial.

And with the help of the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, the youngster's school and the chief judge, authorities could decide to place the offender in a long-term treatment program, Davis said.

Davis said he prefers that juvenile offenders be referred to private treatment centers because they are most "cost-effective."

Last year, Davis announced the creation of just such a private program, STEP Inc. He envisions a clinic with a permanent staff. He said he is about a month away from getting the clinic's non-profit status sanctioned by the Internal

Revenue Service. When that happens, he said, he will begin to solicit contributions.

STEP's clients would pay a fee for their treatment, said Marsha DeWeese, STEP's secretary and one of its directors. Those fees will be used to pay employee salaries. The only other bay area programs similar to STEP are Straight Inc., in St. Petersburg, and Life Inc., in Sarasota, she said.

Part of the inspiration for STEP came from Davis' own family.

His daughter became a heavy user of marijuana at the age of 14, Davis said, and she began to commit petty crimes such as burglary and criminal mischief. She was on the way to fitting the definition of a serious repeat offender.

Private counseling and other conventional methods failed. "We were at the point where if my child had died, we probably would have felt better. Our family was dysfunctional," Davis said.

Finally, Davis put his daughter in the Life Inc. treatment program. Now 16, she is back at home and part of the family again.

Davis' bosses appreciate his efforts, and they say that for now his dual involvement poses no problems.

"I don't see any problem with it, because he started a long time before SHOCAP came along. And he's not running with it (STEP) yet," said Undersheriff Kirk.

Sheriff's office attorney Paul Marino, a member of the board of directors of STEP, says he had never heard of the SHOCAP program and that it never came up at any STEP board meetings.

Marino, who said he will provide legal advice to STEP, dismissed a suggestion that Davis could involve the sheriff's office in a conflict. But, he said, "If the sheriff's office were to engage in this program ... I think we would have to look at that very carefully, to make sure there is no possible conflict of interest."

Col. Cal Henderson, head of the enforcement operations department, said that if Davis was put in a position where he was recommending people for his own program, he would be moved to another area, or he would get out of the program.

But for now, he said, "It doesn't bother me at all."

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