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Ohio offers visits to families of detained youth

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By ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS, The Associated Press

12:16 PM Saturday, June 16, 2012

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The state is using a federal grant to provide free bus rides to families of young people detained in state juvenile detention centers as a way of helping with the rehabilitation process and make it easier for the youths to re-enter the community.

The Department of Youth Services began the program with visits over Mother's Day and planned to continue them with bus trips Saturday, the day before Father's Day.

Families must call their child's social worker to get on the visitation list and then reserve a seat on the bus through their child's parole officer.

Tonya Thompson of Columbus, with no driver's license and no money for a bus ticket, said she was heartbroken when she learned where her 15-year-old son would serve his time on a robbery charge: at Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility in Massillon in northeast Ohio, about a two-hour drive.

She'd been able to visit him twice weekly when he was jailed in Columbus but until she went on last month's bus trip her visits were limited to letters and occasional calls.

"If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't have got to see him," she said.

The 44-year-old hairdresser called the visit heartwarming and said she hoped to make it again.

Buses were scheduled to leave Saturday from Dayton and Cincinnati for families visiting Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility, and from Akron and Cleveland for families visiting Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility.

One in every two of the about 580 young people under state

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supervision don't receive a visit from a family member during the average stay of about a year.

The state plans to use its \$18,640 grant from the U.S. Justice Department to continue monthly visits through year's end.

Young people behind bars "need to have a support system during their stay and in order to successfully reenter the community," said Ohio Youth Prisons director Harvey Reed.

Wisconsin had a similar program of monthly visits for about 20 years, and more recently upped those to weekly visits. Buses alternate taking families from the Milwaukee and Green Bay areas to Lincoln Hills School in Irma, Wis., about a four-hour bus trip. The state's youth prisons division covers the cost of the trip through its regular budget.

Families may not have a car or can't afford the gas for the trip, said John Ourada, the school's deputy superintendent. Wisconsin's Division of Juvenile Corrections also invites family members to centers around the state for video chats with their child.

Recent studies of adult prisoners in Florida and Minnesota found strong connections between getting visits and not returning to prison.

The Minnesota Department of Corrections study of 16,420 offenders released from 2003 to 2007 also found that visits from siblings, in-laws, fathers and clergy had the most impact, as did visits closer to when an offender is scheduled for release.

Andrew Welsh-Huggins can be reached at <http://twitter.com/awhcolumbus>

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