

Once again, mentors needed for teens

'Boot camps' don't work. One-on-one mentoring does. That is what corrections officials have learned about rehabilitating teenagers who have committed crimes. Now they are looking for volunteer mentors in Stark County.

Keeping juveniles in custody is an expensive proposition in Ohio — \$219 per child per day — Thomas Stickrath, director of the state Department of Youth Services, told The Repository Editorial Board on Monday. So using rehabilitation methods that keep kids from becoming repeat offenders makes financial sense to taxpayers.

But unlike the get-tough approach of boot camps, individual mentoring of teen offenders isn't an out-of-sight, out-of-mind proposition. DYS needs ordinary citizens to volunteer to "fill in some of the missing gaps in the youths' lives," Stickrath said. Stark County is one place where DYS hopes to find these volunteers. That also makes sense — Stark County is one of only four places in Ohio to pioneer a DYS "re-entry initiative" for juvenile crime offenders.

Now in its second year, the local program is "an incredible model," Stickrath says. He credits Stark County Family Court Judge David Stucki and other court employees, social service agencies, schools and others for the collaboration they have developed. Of the 28 young people enrolled, none had become a repeat offender when The Repository wrote about the Stark pilot project recently. Instead, they are focusing on getting an education, holding down a job or working on other problems that had sent them down the wrong path.

At a forum Monday at Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility in Massillon, Stickrath urged representatives of churches and faith-based agencies to tell their members about the need for volunteers. Does this sound familiar? It is the second time in three weeks that Stark Countians have been asked to help young people in trouble.

At a Stark County Leadership Summit on gang culture on Nov. 8, a former leader of a gang in Arkansas got specific. Referring to a teenage girl who had spoken earlier in the evening, he asked the audience, "Are there women here who are willing to mentor this young lady? If not, we're bluffing." Several prospective mentors raised their hands in response.

This is the kind of response DYS needs, too. As Stickrath notes, "Since there are no life sentences in DYS, all of our kids will be returning back to the community at some point."

The community can help these kids, or it can fear and shun them. Which will help the kids — and the community — more?

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