

Star Beacon: New program aims to aid youth

4-22-15 Justin Dennis

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More Ashtabula County youth will have access to family therapists thanks to a new state grant-funded program.

Local and regional human services workers were briefed Wednesday on the program, which is designed to improve outcomes for at-risk youth in Ashtabula and surrounding counties.

Multi-systemic therapy, or MST, is an intervention program that makes licensed therapists available 24/7 to children aged 12 to 17 and their families in schools, homes and neighborhoods. The program is an effort to stem the flow of kids transplanted into out-of-home placement facilities, such as juvenile detention, that are often costly or don't provide positive end results, said Matt Kresic, CEO of Homes for Kids, which is heading up the program locally.

"What we've seen in Trumbull and Mahoning counties in actually implementing (MST) is we've been able to reduce the kids that go into placements as a result of having therapists go into the home and work through the treatment models that empower families on some level to do things that perhaps they don't have the tools or skills to do," he said.

In MST, trained behavioral experts stick with families for four months on average, spending about five hours per week inside the home identifying behavioral patterns or familial or peer relations that contribute to delinquency.

Sometimes, Kresic said, it's parents who need the most coaching. But, as Wednesday's presentation stated, part of MST's success comes from the therapy environments — homes, schools or neighborhoods — which are natural for the youth and family.

"The key is empowering parents," he said.

County Common Pleas Juvenile Court Judge Albert Campese said MST lines up with new programs in the county juvenile justice system, which will play a crucial role in the program. The new juvenile drug court is currently undergoing state Supreme Court certification to be able to work alongside family members for youth intervention. He said one of the targeted groups for MST is children involved in or surrounded by substance abuse.

"One of the initiatives that I'm trying to bring to the juvenile court is to intervene at an earlier point and in a more effective fashion with these children and, in a larger context, with the

families,” he said. “So we can prevent these children from moving on and repeating the criminal behavior or the bad behavior that might be present in the house.

“Why this particular program is exciting is it puts a Master’s-degreed therapist in the home 24/7 if need be,” he said. “Where they’re identifying what the patterns are in the home and what the behaviors are in the home and they’re providing the structure and the blueprint that might be lacking.”

A \$250,000 grant awarded by the state Department of Youth Services to Northeast Ohio Regional RECLAIM — which stands for Reasonable and Equitable Community and Local Alternatives to the Incarceration of Minors — will make the MST program a reality in the region. The competitive grant was one of just two awarded statewide and is replenished annually for three to five years, depending on the success of the program, Kresic said. Without it, agency officials said budget constraints would have made it impossible.

According to Tania Burnett, executive director of county children services, placement costs more than \$7,000 per month for one youth. A study conducted by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy in 2006 showed MST accounted for an estimated net savings of more than \$18,000 per youth for Washington taxpayers. For every \$1 invested in MST, a little more than \$5 was saved in placement costs.

“If you divert one kid, we basically pay for 12 kids for the year (in MST),” Kresic said. “These are the cost efficiencies that we can see come out of this type of program.”

A separate \$24,000 grant awarded to the regional RECLAIM collaborative will pay for a follow-up program, High Fidelity Wraparound — a less intensive service that continues to identify families’ needs and provide support after exiting MST. With current resources, between 10 and 12 children can be serviced through the new county program each year, Camplese said.

MST is in place in more than 12 countries around the world and more than 30 states across the country. In some states, it’s part of the human services framework. And there’s more than 30 years of scientific results backing it.

According to results presented Wednesday, the program decreased long-term youth re-arrest rates by 25 percent to 70 percent, compared to those that didn’t enter MST. Long-term rates of days youth spent in out-of-home placement facilities were cut about in half. Improved school attendance and performance and decreased adolescent psychiatric symptoms and substance abuse were also seen.

In a two-year independent trial conducted in Ohio, 23 percent of MST participants were less likely to be re-arrested and arrests and arraignments per youth dropped 39 percent over the course of the study.

In MST, providers are held accountable for the youth outcomes. Kresic said the program will generate statistical reports every six months on how many youth were referred into the program and how many of them ended up in juvenile court or placement facilities.

“You’re taking tax dollars that otherwise would be spent with, really, a statistically small impact and you’re replacing it with one with a statistically high impact program,” Camplese said.