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State pushing, and paying, to keep juveniles out of prison

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By **Alan Johnson**

The Columbus Dispatch • Sunday May 8, 2016 5:48 AM

The state wants to reduce the number of juvenile offenders entering state prisons and is spending money to make it happen.

The Ohio Department of Youth Services is allocating \$1.6 million to assist 23 counties, including Franklin and others in central Ohio, with "detention alternatives."

Department Director Harvey Reed said the goal is to divert youths from state prisons to prevent them from "diving deeper into the system."

The agency, which now operates just three detention centers for youths, hopes to divert an estimated 800 juvenile offenders by providing alternatives such as evening and assessment reporting centers, crisis shelters and additional electronic monitoring. About \$400,000 of the \$1.6 million will be spent on safety and security upgrades.

In Fairfield County, Juvenile Court Judge Terre L. Vandervoort said she will use the state money to develop a day and evening reporting center as a local alternative to sentencing juvenile offenders to a state prison, which costs more.

"This will strike the right balance in protecting the community, holding youth accountable, and providing skills and competencies young people need to succeed in the future," Vandervoort said in a statement.

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She estimates that the new reporting center will serve about 250 youths and save the county \$300,000 a year.

Gabriella Celeste, director of Child Policy at Case Western Reserve University's Schubert Center for Child Studies, said diverting youths from state prisons helps to "deter deeper justice involvement for youth."

Among the other counties receiving state grants are Delaware, Madison and Marion.

Youth services handles felony offenders who are 10 to 21 years old. In addition to detention centers, the agency provides parole services and funds about 600 community programs that serve 79,000 youths.

At the same time, the Children's Law Center, a legal service agency that advocates for children and youths, is showing people what it's like to be a juvenile offender locked in isolation. The agency sponsored a display called "The Box" at a recent Ohio State Bar Association conference. Santa Barbara, California, photographer Richard Ross created the 8-by-4-foot replica of isolation cells that are still used for some juvenile offenders in Ohio.

The state has abandoned isolation cells, but they are remain in some non-state detention facilities and treatment programs.

The Children's Law Center began advocating for elimination of isolation cells last year, arguing that being locked up alone for long periods "can cause psychological harm, (can) exacerbate existing mental-health conditions, limits needed programming and education, and places youth at much greater risk of self-harm, including suicide."

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