

Families of juvenile offenders helped in new program

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LIMA - A new state program will help navigate what can be a bumpy road for families of children released from Department of Youth Services custody.

Urban Minority Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Outreach Program, or UMADAOP, with regional offices throughout Ohio, including Lima, is performing the work.

The program is a first of its kind, Youth Services Director Tom Stickrath said, and the need for it was identified by family focus groups and agencies advocating for youths in the juvenile justice system.

When children are released from any of the eight juvenile correctional facilities in the state, they can face complex family issues and can use continued government programs.

"All of our kids will be released no later than their 21st birthday, so there are no life sentences here," Stickrath said. "The youth are coming back to our communities and this helps break down some barriers and look to re-entry and reunification."

UMADAOP representatives contact the offenders and their families a month before the any release. Families are connected with an array of services, including employment, education, health care, violence prevention and family counseling. A counselor also checks for family eligibility of things such as food stamps, work support benefits, health care coverage and home energy assistance.

Amy Miller, a prevention educator in the Lima UMADAOP office, is one of those counselors in what's called the Building Effective Solutions Together program.

"We've been doing the program about two months," Miller said. "We see it working. We get a lot of positive feedback. I work with a youth and a grandmother who has custody and she talks to us as much as she can."

The program is funded with a \$1 million Temporary Assistance for Needy Families grant, with an additional \$100,000 from Youth Services for families who don't qualify for TANF funds.