

Report: Youth assistance program working

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

It probably wasn't needed, but the Oakland Youth Assistance program has received a huge vote of confidence.

A consulting firm — hired after competitive bidding with \$616,000 from the Skillman Foundation — spent three years evaluating youth assistance and came to a conclusion:

It's working.

Youth assistance was initiated by the Oakland County Probate Court more than 40 years ago. With the help of school districts, local municipalities and volunteers, the program is aimed at "at risk" youngsters.

There's no rigid definition for the term "at risk." Some might say helping kids "at risk" is a way of preventing juvenile delinquency, according to Bill Waggoner, a stock broker who is chair of the Troy Youth Assistance.

That loose definition, however, may be part of the program's success.

Basically, "at risk" generally means any youngster who can use some help.

"We don't wait for a referral," explained Southfield resident Crenna Dudley, a psychologist at the Children's Center in Detroit, a provider of mental health services for youngsters. "We can reach out. We don't have to wait until the kid is in trouble."

Dudley said she got involved about five years ago. She wrote a letter to the Southfield mayor that led to her becoming part of the Southfield Parent-Youth Guidance Commission.

"I was investing in my kids (then ages 6 and 8)," she said.

Over the years, youth assistance has helped thousands of youngsters, mainly through volunteers. Currently, 1,600 youngsters are involved in the program with the assistance of more than 1,000 volunteers.

"But we always need more volunteers," said Joan Brest who, with her husband Clint, has been involved in youth assistance in Orion Township for about 20 years.

Not only does youth assistance need more volunteers, they should be more diverse, according to the evaluation conducted by Community Service Systems, Inc., of Ann Arbor.

The company was hired to take a close look at youth ser-

vices and, as objectively as possible, see if the program was working as designed, according to Pamela S. Howitt, probate court deputy administrator. "It's the fourth such evaluation we've had in the eight years I've been here."

The evaluation told Howitt, other administrators and the probate judges they are on the right track in designing and implementing programs for at-risk youngsters. "It's good to know we're reaching the people we want to reach," she said.

Howitt noted one impressive statistic: "Ninety-two percent of the youngsters we reach have no subsequent contact with the court."

About those volunteers.

The evaluation found that most volunteers are white females, over 30, who are well-educated and have lived in their respective communities for 20 years or longer. "Youth assistance needs more minorities of varying ages," said Howitt, "and more males."

Furthermore, the study concluded, there's a high turn-over rate among volunteers, 30 to 60 percent annually, and there's a



danger of burn out, especially when they are required to get involved in fund raising.

Other findings included in the 900-page report:

• Poverty is the single best way to predict that someone will be referred to the court system.

Rich or affluent families have problems, and serious ones. Howitt said. But, possibly not as frequently as families beset with financial problems such as inadequate family income due to unemployment. Other factors — such as single-parent families and educational levels — also have an influence.

• Rates of alcohol and other drug use in Oakland County are slightly higher than the national rate.

"The rate is only slightly higher," Howitt said, adding that's a characteristic of Oakland County.

• More affluent communities are perceived as having fewer problems.

"We don't know if that's an

accurate perception or not," Howitt said. "But we do know that communities, rich or poor, with a higher sense of identity are more cohesive and tend to come together more to deal with their problems."

Although youth assistance is flexible, it works primarily through five channels: Camps, both day and residential; family education; skill building; teen centers, like those in Royal Oak, Novi, Farmington Hills and PLUS (People Listening, Understanding and Sharing), which matches young people and adults for mentoring — something like the big-brothers or big-sisters.

James VanDyke, an attorney who is chair of the General Citizens Committee that facilitates youth assistance in Birmingham, remembers a case in which PLUS was particularly rewarding.

"I had a client who died unexpectedly," said VanDyke. "He was able to link the 8-year-old son with a man who stepped in and filled the void, said VanDyke. The man couldn't replace the youngster's father, but he could take an interest in the youth and help him through some difficult

times, he said.

"It (the matching) was remarkably positive," VanDyke said. "And it was fulfilling to be part of it."

Using volunteers, like himself, enables youth assistance to get "maximum bang for the dollar" in terms of efficiency, VanDyke said.

With that kind of feedback, youth assistance might not have

needed any evaluation from an outside consultant. But an objective analysis assures the court — and volunteers — that they are on the right track toward helping youngsters and strengthening families, according to Howitt.

Brest cited an example of how the family education program was effective. She and her

See YOUTH, A10

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