

Aid comes to jailed parents, their kids

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SANTA CRUZ — Nearly \$1 million in new federal funding will be spent on countywide efforts to help families of jailed adults — before and after their loved ones leave their cells — and will also provide money for counseling and other services for the inmates.

The target is a successful life outside jail walls for the inmates and their children.

Probation officers and others, armed with the \$900,000 grant, plan to implement several new efforts and say funds spent on inmate counseling will, for the first time, include the men's and women's families in a significant way.

Helping such parents and their kids goes hand-in-hand, says Scott MacDonald, the county Probation Department's assistant chief. Yet, he says, criminal justice planning nationwide overlooks the need to help kids and partners of those in custody.

And such a dearth has dire consequences for kids, MacDonald said.

A recent county study of teens most deeply entrenched in the criminal justice system showed the teens had mothers who were absent an average 444 days of the teens' young lives and dads missing an average 3.9 years, he said.

"And that's just local jail time," he says. "We didn't count prison time.... What we see is a national program chasm between adult services and the juvenile system, and at the bottom of that chasm is the kids who will soon be delinquent if we don't deal with them."

MacDonald, a UC Santa Cruz alumni and father of two teens, recently moved to adult probation after helping bring juvenile probation to model status in its ability to reduce the teen arrest rate and decrease the number in Juvenile Hall.

The grant funds he helped secure, received in July, will allow probation officers to assist families while a parent is in jail, and in some cases, for up to six months after the parent has served his or her time. They plan to serve 100 mostly school-age children.

Specifics include:

- Two new social workers at Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance.
- A new probation officer.
- Increased visiting hours at medium-security Rountree jail's drug treatment program, which treats 60 men per year and recently narrowly survived a withholding of state funds. A recent study estimated a third of those at Rountree are parents and that 270 county kids have a parent in custody "on any given day," more than half from the Watsonville area.

- A youth group will also produce a video to tell parents how it feels to be a child of a jailed parent, without "guilt-tripping them," organizers say. It will be shown in county jails.

Those involved in the grant include the Watsonville-based Community Action Board's Youth Restoration Project (YCORP), Probation, the Sheriff's Office (which runs the jails) and Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance Inc.

Applying for the federal grant, county officials cited a 2003 study detailing the perilous lives facing children of incarcerated parents. Santa Cruz won the grant by a wide margin, besting 28 others, MacDonald said.

"This is a good community," he said. "The sheriff and everyone else stepped up on this one."

Even the county's top prosecutor, District Attorney Bob Lee, is unabashed in his support for helping families of jailed parents.

"The last thing we want is for children to become future defendants," he said. "And resources spent to keep them successful is money well-spent."

"Common sense tells you that when a child sees a parent in jail, through Plexiglas or whatever, that has to affect him, and obviously there is one less person to parent them, however bad that situation may have been."

Lee says he supports the Rountree drug treatment program (which offers family counseling). But he hesitates at the topic of treatment programs for adults.

"We see people go to counseling over and over again and still they re-offend," he said. "But at least this is concentrating on kids."

Linda Perez of Pajaro Valley Prevention said her organization will provide family and couples counseling, except in instances where domestic violence or other issues prevent that. Kids will get more tutoring as well, and drug treatment, if needed. This agency will get the two social workers, though one is a half-time position.

"Pajaro Valley Unified School District is our target population and we do all kinds of things to engage them in positive activities," she said. "The services are extensive. But I am just pleased to have resources to specifically target this population. I believe they are the highest risk at this point and I believe we will see more and more dollars targeted to children of incarcerated adults nationwide."

"I believe we're on the cutting edge."

Officials acknowledge, however, that despite all the gains in juvenile probation, the county remains above the state average for juvenile crime, especially in Watsonville.

Greg Simmons, 18, of Watsonville is a juvenile success story for those at the Community Action Board's Youth Community Restoration Project, a partner in the grant.

Simmons is earning an equivalency degree and Thursday was getting help on his first resume — for a second job. He works at Green Valley Grill. His background is not as challenged as some, he says, and he has two parents with whom he enjoys a good relationship.

But he has many friends who don't fare as well.

"The project just hooked me up," he said. "It helped a lot. But I know lots of friends with parents in prison, or ones who have been in prison, and I see a lot of differences in them. I don't know why — they just got a lot of problems and a lot of stuff inside they don't want to talk about.

"They are good people, they just never had good role models I guess."

But now, MacDonald said, post-jail planning for those teen's parents will be more meaningful and will include them.

"It takes on this greater proportion," he said. "We deal with a lot of things, society, the victim and now, the children. I really hope it not only will heighten the importance of them getting better, for themselves, and for their kids, but will help them become more sensitized to the impact on their kids.

"Absence of a parent is a traumatic experience, even when the parent has problems."