

NEWS

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May 27, 2010

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Public Defender juvenile program named best in state

A Public Defender's Office program designed to keep juvenile defendants and kids at-risk of becoming defendants out of trouble has been recognized as the best Public Defender's program in the state.

The California Public Defenders Association this month awarded the San Bernardino County Public Defender's Office with the CPDA Program of the Year Award for the office's Alternative Approaches to Rehabilitation within the Community program.

"This recognition is very important to San Bernardino County," said Board of Supervisors Vice Chair Josie Gonzales. "It tells us that we are moving in the right direction, effectively addressing juvenile crime."

"We'll continue to work together to enhance the program to re-direct our youth and build strong, healthy, safe communities," Gonzales added.

The program was created in 2006 in response to the state's creation of an unfunded mandate requiring counties to provide representation to juveniles throughout the post-dispositional phase of their delinquency cases.

By 2007 the San Bernardino County Public Defender's Office obtained two grant-funded Social Services Practitioner positions, one from the Mental Health Service Act's Prevention and Early Intervention program as administered by San Bernardino County's Department of Behavioral Health, and the other from the Juvenile Accountability Block Grant. The Public Defender also partnered with Loma Linda University, Cal State University San Bernardino and Azusa Pacific University to develop and implement a field placement for students enrolled in their Masters of Social Work program. Without any additional cost to the county, the Public Defender developed an average of 10 highly trained social workers to provide services to its clients.

"It is our duty to provide the most comprehensive care to the children we represent. Helping young people turn their lives around is gratifying, and finding a way to do it without any additional cost is an added benefit," said San Bernardino County Public Defender Doreen Boxer.

The program's two main goals are to assist Public Defender attorneys with providing the children they represent the most comprehensive legal care, and helping those clients obtain the services they need to become productive adults.

Aside from Public Defender clients, their family members and at risk siblings, the program has teamed with various community agencies to develop preventative programs for at-risk youth. The Public Defender works with the District Attorney, Probation Department, Department of Behavioral Health, the County Superintendent of Schools, and the San Bernardino City School District to provide Social Services Practitioners services to the students with the most significant truancy rates in the district to attempt to change their behavior and improve school attendance.

The program's Social Services Practitioners are also members of the Countywide Gangs & Drugs Task Force and the San Bernardino County Children's Network's Youth Mentoring Resource Task Force. Additionally, the Social Services Practitioners spoke to more than 5,000 students during this school year at high schools throughout a local school district for the "Too Good for Drugs" campaign.

Founded in 1969, The California Public Defenders Association is the largest statewide professional association of defense attorneys in the United States. The Program of the Year Award was established to recognize programs and projects operated by local defender agencies that should be recognized for their unique contributions to the criminal justice system and that could serve as models and prototypes for other defender offices that might wish to undertake similar efforts.

CPDA's Awards Committee reviewed the details of the program and recommended to the full board of directors that the award be given this year to the San Bernardino County Public Defender.