

Juvenile Assessment Center
of Lee County
2107 Dr. Martin Luther King Blvd.
Fort Myers, FL 33901
(239) 258-3450
www.swfjac.org

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The JAC Perspective



The Juvenile Assessment Center of Lee County ... assisting youth and their families to seek the treatment and programs they need to lead productive, crime free lives.

Free drug testing kits are available at the JAC 24 hours a day.

Law enforcement should call ahead to

**258-3461
or 258-3471**

when bringing an arrested youth to the JAC or to confirm that a youth is eligible for a civil citation.



The JAC of Lee County is operated by the Lee County Sheriff's Office in partnership with the Lee County Board of County Commissioners and the Department of Juvenile Justice.

Who Are Our "Direct Files?"

The juvenile justice system is designed to rehabilitate youth, but the truth is that it doesn't save them all. The most striking example of this is the youth who are transferred to the adult justice system, a process which is often called "direct file." The Office of the State Attorney has the option to file a motion requesting the court transfer a child for prosecution in the adult criminal justice system. The direct file option is typically only utilized when a youth has a substantial criminal history and/or the State has determined that the youth is dangerous and is not likely to be rehabilitated within the juvenile justice system. Juveniles who are "direct filed" lose all benefits of the juvenile court and are treated in all respects as an adult. Local youth who are subject to a direct filing



are transferred from the Southwest Florida Regional Detention Center located on Ortiz Avenue to the Lee County Jail. Males are housed at the jail in downtown Fort Myers separately from adults. They are transferred to the adult jail

quarters the day they turn 18 years of age if they are still in custody at that time.

Who are these youth who end up in the adult justice system? The JAC reviewed 46 juvenile cases that had been direct filed from 2012 to mid-2014. Although there have been females that have been

direct filed prior to this timeframe, all of the cases reviewed since 2012 were male. They represent less than 3% of the youths whose cases were handled (Continued page 2)

They May Hear You More Than You Think

Many of this newsletter's readers work directly with at-risk youth. It is often a tough job with few "thanks" offered. It is sometimes hard to tell if one is making a difference with a youth. For those readers who wonder if they are making a difference or feel discouraged in working with youth, take heart. One never knows when some small thing one says will be heard and will make a difference. What follows are excerpts (paraphrased) from an email the JAC's Civil Citation Coordinator, Deputy Carolyn Woulard, recently received from a young woman who participated in the civil citation program in early 2013.



Dear Deputy Woulard,
I was looking through my wallet when I found your card and decided to tell you how I am because I wouldn't be where I am now without your help. When I got caught with marijuana at my high school, I did not get arrested but I did get a citation. When I met with you I told you about myself, how I wanted to be somebody and that at the heat of the moment, while I was too infatuated doing what everyone else was, I lost myself and forgot my goals. You then told me how you got your masters degree and never stopped achieving your goals. I'm here to tell you (Continued page 2)

Who Are Our Direct Files? (cont.)

judicially. 43% of the youths were Caucasian and 57% of the youths were Black. Nearly all the youths were ages 16 or 17 at the time they were direct filed, with the exception of one 15 year old and one 13 year old. All but one of the cases direct filed could be considered violent crimes. The one exception was a youth with a long juvenile arrest record who was direct filed for multiple property crimes he committed within days of his 18th birthday. 87% of the cases involved crimes that were committed with a weapon or firearm. 24% of the youths were either documented or suspected gang members. 40% of the youths were not enrolled in school at the time of

their arrest. *Where are we first seeing these youth in the justice system?* All but five of the youths had an arrest record prior to the arrest that resulted in them being direct filed. Their ages at first arrest were: 13% ages 8 to 11; 26% ages 12 to 13; 35% ages 14 to 15; and 26% ages 16 to 17. Many of their first arrests were for low level misdemeanor crimes, such as, petit theft, loitering, and disturbing the peace. Dispositions after the first arrest (for those who had a prior arrest) included: 22.5% received probation; 2.5% received commitment; 47.5% were handled through a diversionary program; 22.5% were not prosecuted; and 5% received adult sanctions.

What was the disposition of these juvenile cases transferred to the adult criminal justice system?

1 youth received adult probation; 3 youths were released from county custody with time served; 1 youth was sentenced to less than a year and is serving the remainder of his time in county custody; 2 youths are out on bond awaiting trial; 8 youths are in county custody awaiting trial; 3 youths have been sentenced to state prison and are in county custody until their transfer; 2 youths were referred back to high risk juvenile commitment programs; and 26 youths, some who are now young adults, are serving time in state prison.

They May Hear You More Than You Think (cont.)

I appreciate those words you said to me. Though I know I am not the first or last juvenile you have made an impact on, I am here to let you know that thanks to you I am striving for success. I moved away to Ohio in hopes of a fresh start, with new people and a new life. Best decision ever. I soon started my sophomore year and began getting good grades. I am not going to lie to you. I had a few issues here and there but they were only boy problems. Nothing major. I soon began focusing more about my future such as what I want to be and what I want to major in. I have come to the conclusion that since I enjoy writing, reading and talking that I should become an English teacher. So I'm thinking about going to Kent University and major in English Literature, Philosophy, and Journalism. I want to be somebody. I have a story to tell just like everyone

else but unlike many I want to be heard. That same impact you made on me, I want to make on some other hopeless child. You gave me hope. You let me know that it wasn't the end, it was only the beginning. (She goes on to explain where she is attending high school and where she works.) My parents trust me and love the young lady they are raising. I understand I made mistakes and will continue to make mistakes because I am human, but the difference is I am growing up and taking more responsibility. I thank God for that one mistake because it was just what I needed to bounce back as a new and better version of myself. I'm not a scared and gullible 14 year old girl anymore and I have you to thank. I know it's part of your job to help kids like me but it's people like you who help mold the leaders of the future and so I say thanks



again. It was a long journey, one that many would say was unnecessary and avoidable, but to me, every step of the way was just a process into creating a strong individual. Everything happens for a reason and this was meant to happen in order for me to remember my goals and grow as a person. Thank you.

“Thanks” to our many newsletter readers who are making a difference in the lives of youth!