

Smyth County

New program seeks to keep children out of the criminal justice system

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SMYTH COUNTY, Va. - A new program to keep children out of the criminal justice system is now up and running in southwest Virginia.

Virginia's Department of Juvenile Justice started revamping their rehabilitation services three years ago. One new tool is Multi-Systemic Therapy, commonly known as MST.

"I can't stress how important it is to provide a service that gives the family an opportunity to build skills that enable them to manage problems appropriately and to have a good outcome," Patricia Davis said. Davis is the Court Service Unit Director for the 28th Judicial District.

The state has partnered with regional service coordinators to provide the therapy for children with a criminal history and their families. In the western district, that organization is Pathways Family Preservation Services.

Karim Assous is a MST supervisor for Family Preservation Services in Charlottesville. Assous said, "We want to keep these children safe while working with the family to create a more positive, structured environment."

The service in Charlottesville reaches a 90-minute radius. That allows families in Smyth County to receive services for children ages 12-17 on court probation with a moderate to high risk of reoffending. Right now, the organization is helping as many as 10 families in Smyth County with therapy lasting on average about 3-5 months.

"Our goal with MST is to keep these children out of detention," Assous said.

MST workers involve the child's family, teachers, coaches and others to work on behavioral change and improved communication.

Children are referred to the program by Juvenile Justice based on risk assessment criteria.

<http://www.wcyb.com/news/virginia/smyth-county/new-program-seeks-to-keep-children-out-of-the-criminal-justice-system/653994887>