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PEOPLE POLL

## New drop-in center for youth in Ward 8

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By Valencia Mohammed  
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Jo Patterson, cofounder and director of Parent Watch, a parent run and operated organization that advocates for families, sat quietly in the audience observing the evolution of a dream of D.C. families.

Patterson and more than two dozen District agency representatives attended the grand opening of the Balanced and Restorative Justice Drop-In Center, a multi-faceted facility, including a satellite probation office located in southeast Washington.

"By investing in youth we will be better off. We will help youth build and maintain their future," said D.C. Superior Court Judge Anita Josey-Herring.

According to court officials, east-of-the-river pre-adjudicated youth or students facing probation revocation will be able to take advantage of a number of positive, pro-social activities including tutoring, mentoring,



education and prevention groups, peer mediation, recreation, and field trips. The center will be open Monday through Saturday and will serve court-supervised youth and their families.

"This is a part of a continuing build out of our family court," said the Honorable Judge Rufus King, Chief Judge of the D.C. Superior Court.

U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu (D-La.) has supported several efforts in the D.C. Family Court for the last few years. "Isn't this wonderful? Although children make up one-third of the population, they make up 100 percent of our future. This investment will go a long way," said Landrieu.

In January 2002, President Bush signed into law the D.C. Family Court Act of 2001. One major provision of the act was the one family / one judge principle, designed to ensure continuity for families and children before the family court.

With collaborative support from the D.C. Justice Grants Administration Office, the court decided to extend this principle by implementing a one family/one probation officer approach, and to expand the use of Family Court Social Services Division's satellite offices to include strength-based probation supervision.

"Far too long this area of the District has been neglected. We are going in a new direction. This government facility and the programs included shows that we do care about the residents of Ward 8," said D.C. Councilman Marion Barry (D-Ward 8).

D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty was also on hand to lend his support.

"After so many years focusing on arresting youth, we are saying if we want to really solve the problems then do something different. This represents a change in our thinking," said Fenty.

The Court Social Services Division envisions that this non-traditional

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approach will enhance probation supervision in the District and beyond. The division is working to leverage start-up funds to replicate this model in all other quadrants of the city, to centralize functions and services now available from different providers through the division's satellite offices in Northeast and Southeast and the downtown office serving Southwest and other populations.

"It's not the system that has failed the youth. Their families have failed them," said D.C. Council Chairman Vincent Gray.

Astonished at the remark, Patterson looked at the program and said with a sigh, "Somehow parents have been excluded as one of the key players in this project after all the work we've done. But that's okay. No matter what anyone thinks our children will still need us to succeed."

Court officials said the office will open March 1.

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