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## COLUMNS

### Working Lunch: Giving Juvenile Offenders a Chance

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Terri Odom, director of D.C. Superior Court's Social Services Division.  
Diego M. Radzinski/Legal Times

According to statistics released by D.C. Courts, the number of new juvenile cases in the District jumped last year from 1,776 to 1,994. Meanwhile, more and more youth offenders throughout the country are being charged as adults. In February, the **D.C. Superior Court Social Services Division** spearheaded the opening of the Balance and Restorative Justice Drop-In Center, located in a court satellite office in Southeast Washington. The facility, the first of its kind in the District, aims to prevent juveniles in the criminal justice system from ending up as adult offenders. Last week, Terri Odom, director of the D.C. Superior Court Social Services Division, spoke with Legal Times reporter **Osita Iroegbu** about the center, its role in the lives of juveniles in the D.C. court system, and how it may soon serve as a model for other areas of the District.

#### LT: What is the purpose of the Balance and Restorative Justice Drop-In Center?

**Odom:** The BARJ facility provides an alternative to detention for medium- to high-risk pre-adjudicated juveniles and post-disposition juveniles through after-school services in the community and family involvement with a strong focus on rehabilitating the offender. The program consists of male youth who reside in the Southeast quadrant of the city and offers courtroom and probation services and other rehabilitative, social, and educational activities. The program acknowledges that when a crime occurs, the victim and the community are all affected. Until restoration happens, none of these can be the same again. We are attempting to reduce the juvenile recidivism rate.

#### LT: Why was this program implemented only in Southeast?

**Odom:** Most of the juvenile crimes that occur, occur in Ward 8. There are 275 kids in Southeast who are on probation, which represents about two-thirds of kids on probation. Thirty youth participate in the program on any given day. The center is open from 3:30 p.m. to 9 p.m., which are the peak hours of juvenile crime.

#### LT: How are the youth selected, and are you seeing any changes in the community since the program's inception?

**Odom:** For every pretrial and adjudicated kid, we make recommendations as to whether the youth can benefit from participating in this alternative, versus juvenile detention centers. We are seeing that the youth are enjoying spending time in the center and not in the streets. And parents are becoming more involved. In addition to the parents, probation officers are playing a huge role in the rehabilitation process.

#### LT: What types of activities are available for youth at the center that would help lead toward rehabilitation?

**Odom:** They perform mock trials, participate in drug use and abuse education, mentoring, and peer-to-peer mediation. We have a foosball and ping-pong table and also have Saturday hours that include social activities and community service. Most of that takes place in or near places where the crime took place. This is for restoration purposes. And literacy plays a huge role at the center. It has a significant correlation to juvenile crime, so we can't stress literacy enough in our program. We offer essay-writing contests, and what we are promoting is the fact that if you are literate, your chances of having opportunities increase phenomenally, and with opportunities, you are less likely to commit a crime.

#### LT: Is the program showing any signs of success?

**Odom:** Yes. The attendance rate at the center is 90 percent. One hundred percent of the youth in the facility show up for trial, and there have been no rearrests since the center opened.

The Southeast center definitely serves as a model. Efforts are under way to create a BARJ drop-in center in all the quadrants of the District. We feel this will result in reduced recidivism and break the cycle of crime.

*Working Lunch* appears every other week in Legal Times.