Goodwill program aims to help juvenile offenders 'figure out their lives'

By DAPHNE DURET

For many youthful offenders, getting arrested means guaranteed time in a juvenile detention center to wait for a hearing or trial.

Elise Johansen, director of Youth Enrichment Services at Gulfstream Goodwill, says she's seen incarceration too often turn teens with a chance to correct their wrongs into repeat offenders who end up spending years in the system.

But now Johansen and others at Goodwill are hoping an alternative program they began last month in Palm Beach County will keep some of those borderline teens out of jail. It could even help some of them figure out whether undiagnosed mental or behavioral issues contributed to their choices.

Under the program, which coordinators call the Alternative to Secure Detention Program, youthful offenders will be released to their parents after their arrests and will have to meet six days a week with Goodwill volunteers.

"We're doing more than just going to the schools and checking to see whether they're going," Johansen said. "For us, it's about partnering with them to help them figure out their lives."

Gulfstream Goodwill leaders will finance the program with $183,000 in grants they will receive from the Criminal Justice Commission of Palm Beach County.

Becky Walker, the commission's criminal justice program manager, says the commission has been looking to fund a program like Goodwill's since last year. Not only do such programs keep youthful offenders from committing more crimes, Walker said, but they are less expensive than incarceration.

"There's the double benefit there of having the best impact on their lives and helping the community around them as a whole," Walker said.

Some of Goodwill's grant money will go toward hiring a neuropsychologist who will be available to evaluate teens in the program if their parents approve. None of the teens offered the testing has accepted yet, but Johansen believed one teen now in the program will.
Johansen says that because it's possible for a youthful offender to have undiagnosed behavioral problems such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder at the time of the arrest, the evaluation might answer questions that parents, teachers and law enforcement had about his or her behavior.

"These are the kinds of cases where everyone thinks 'OK, there's something wrong here,' but no one can figure out exactly what it is," Johansen said.

Aside from the neuropsychologist, Johansen says the agency is hiring a certified teacher for after-school tutoring.

The Gulfstream Goodwill also works with other groups such as the North Palm Beach-based Florida Community Alliance, which provides mental health counseling to juvenile offenders and has a mentoring program partnering them with law enforcement officers.

"It's important in these situations to build the sense of self confidence, self-reliance and self-accountability so that they will make different choices in the future," FCA Director of Programs Afifa Khaliq said.

Professor Gordon Bazemore, chair of the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice and director of the Community Justice Institute at Florida Atlantic University, says a juvenile offender who stays in a detention center is 40 to 50 percent more likely to get in further trouble than offenders who are released into a program like Goodwill's.

"That experience of being detained has a tremendously negative effect on them," Bazemore said.

Bazemore, who has spent more than 30 years researching, writing and directing projects aimed at juvenile justice reform, said he believes programs that place a heavy emphasis on psychological counseling can lead to unjustified labeling.

But the fact that the Goodwill program offers the testing as just one component of a program whose basis is in mentoring makes it the type of program where youthful offenders have had the most success, he says.

"Most kids, if they are treated the right way, can learn to do things well," Bazemore said.