



**HARRIS COUNTY JUVENILE  
MENTAL HEALTH COURT  
HOUSTON, TX**

## **PROBLEMS FACING THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM**

Though the prevalence of mental disorders among youth in general population is estimate to be about 22 percent, the prevalence rate for youth in the juvenile justice system is estimate to be as high as 60 percent. Due to a lack of appropriate and accessible community behavioral health services, frustrated families frequently resort to the juvenile justice system as they struggle to manage their child's escalating emotional difficulties. This is a particularly critical issue in Texas, which ranks 49th nationally in funding for children's outpatient public mental health services.<sup>1</sup>

Youth whose delinquent conduct is impacted by their mental illness are often adjudicated and placed in county facilities that are ill-equipped to address the underlying clinical component of the delinquent conduct. Not surprisingly, placement in a punitive environment often exacerbates mental illness and leads to an escalation in symptoms and problem behavior which institutional staff are not trained to effectively manage. Additionally, removing a child from their family and community isolates the child in an artificial environment making successful reintegration and sustainable change within the family system unlikely.

## **THE COURT'S SOLUTION**

In response to the large number of cases involving mentally ill juveniles appearing in his court, Judge John Phillips expressed an interest in presiding over a juvenile mental health court. However, at the time this interest was expresses, the probation department did not have the ability to effectively screen and identify mentally ill youth prior to their court appearance. Until recently, comprehensive behavioral health assessment was conducted following adjudication and only on juveniles who were being placed outside the home.

In 2007, the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department implemented a triage assessment system at the front door of the Harris County Juvenile Detention Center that effectively and efficiently identifies children with mental illness, mental retardation and substance abuse.

Data generated by this assessment substantiated the anecdotal experience of the juvenile

justice community. Approximately 50 percent of all youth in the detention center from symptoms of a mental illness, with 22–55% experiencing symptoms of a severe emotional disturbance. In addition to creating a comprehensive profile of juvenile justice involved youth, data generated by this assessment supported the creation of a juvenile mental health court to serve as a therapeutic alternative for those youth whose delinquent conduct is a direct result of their mental illness. In a proactive effort to avoid further criminalization of these mentally ill youth, Judge John Phillips provided the leadership for the development of a juvenile mental health court and in 2008 Harris County Commissioners Court approved the funding necessary for implementation.

## **HARRIS COUNTY JUVENILE MENTAL HEALTH COURT**

The Harris County Juvenile Mental Court utilizes a therapeutic approach to juvenile offenders whose delinquent conduct is significantly impacted by a serious emotional disturbance. The mental health court emphasizes rehabilitation over punishment. The ultimate goal is to ensure public safety while decreasing recidivism by facilitating coordinated mental health interventions.

The benefits of the mental health court include the following:

- Utilizes individualized treatment plan and case management services
  - Facilitates multidisciplinary team approach—team members act individually and collaboratively to balance interests of family, youth and public safety
  - Harris County Juvenile Mental Health Court Team members include the Judge, District Attorney’s Office, Defense Attorney, Court Psychologist, Court Case Manager, treatment provider, Probation Officer, family and youth
  - Treatment plan is a ‘living document’—responds to youth and family needs as they arise, addresses barriers, adds additional services as needed
- Facilitates immediate linkage to intensive therapeutic and wrap-around services
  - Therapeutic services address the underlying diagnostic contributor to the delinquent behavior and subsequently reduce recidivism
  - Wrap-around services address complex set of variables leading to juvenile involvement including poverty, lack of appropriate housing, lack of adequate insurance, parent health issues, etc.
  - Home-based services eliminate traditional service barriers such as lack of transportation

- Prioritize community-based referral sources over residential placement
  - Community-based services increase family involvement—families develop relationships with juvenile justice and treatment providers
  - Community-based services provide educational services for families—families learn to effectively understand and manage their child’s behavior
  - Community-based interventions are both less expensive and more effective than institutional placement
  - Community-based services encourage independence and self sufficiency—families learn the skills needed to successfully access and navigate services independently
- Increases collaboration between the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department and community mental health providers
  - Judicial supervision of service provision increases accountability of community service providers

The Harris County Juvenile Mental Health Court is at the forefront of the juvenile mental health courts movement. Mental health courts effectively address the underlying clinical component of delinquent behavior in mentally ill juvenile offenders, while emphasizing public safety and personal accountability. Additionally, through creating community-based alternatives to placement, mental health courts play an integral role in the development of mental health services. The availability of accessible services will ultimately allow families an alternative to relying on the juvenile justice system for treatment, a practice which results in the criminalization of mentally ill juveniles.

<sup>1</sup> Children's Mental Health in Harris County". A Report of the Mental Health Needs Council, Inc. (2006)