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Judge finds funds for effort to keep kids out of court



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Sara Nealeigh, snealeigh@gannett.com 11:43 p.m. EDT June 4, 2015



(Photo: Submitted photo)

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CHILLICOTHE – Just days before Judge J. Jeffrey Benson took office, he read an article about an after-school program offered to youth by the Chillicothe & Ross County Public Libraries.

The program strives to provide positive options for 15 to 20 children a day over the course of a year.

On his first day as a new juvenile court judge, Benson and his staff looked at the how the court could assist the program.

"I knew early on there was funding and we could use it to help with juvenile court issues. ... The way we use it just had to be approved. In this case, it would be a positive alternative to court," Benson said.

The Ross County Juvenile Court was able to provide \$10,000 in grant money to further the reach of the program. The money comes from the Department of Youth Services through the Reasoned and Equitable Community and Local Alternatives to the Incarceration of Minors grant.

"It's a preventative measure that provides structure. ... We want to do anything to avoid kids getting into DYS," Benson said.

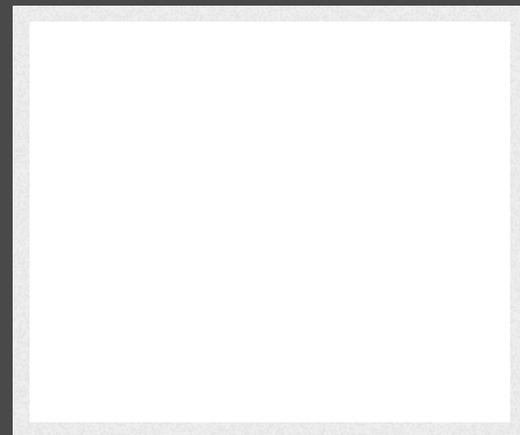
The RECLAIM grant has existed since 1993, and its funds became available statewide. Allocations are based on a formula that includes an average of felony adjudications over four years, with deductions for Department of Youth Services and community corrections facility bed day usage in the prior year, according to the grant's website.

The cost of keeping one child incarcerated for 18 days is \$10,000, according to a news release. That same amount of money will be used to support the library's activities to keep youth out of the juvenile court system.

"We started a mobile computer lab so we could provide different programs to children in areas we considered high risk. This gives them some alternative options," said Mike Jones, Special Services Manager for the Chillicothe Ross Public Library.

The money from the RECLAIM grant will allow for repairs and replacements of the computers and gaming devices used in the program.

"We've also partnered up with housing authorities and other agencies to target where



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we have identified the need," Jones said.

In addition to computers and video games, Jones says the library hopes to use the grant money to purchase a projector and speakers to show movies and keep children entertained.

Benson is working to expand to other area districts a program started by Judge Richard Ward at Chillicothe High School that gives students a positive and productive alternative through the school system. It offers physical activities such as running and swimming, as well as lessons in leadership, CPR, water safety and core values, according to a statement from Benson's office.

"It's done a lot for morale of kids there and discipline has gone way down and attendance has gone up for those involved," Benson said.

Chillicothe High School Principal Jeff Fisher said he knows students have directly benefited from programs that give them either a quiet place to work on homework, access to the Internet or structured time and opportunities they may not have had before.

"We have an extension program outside the library to help them secure skills for employment so they can use their time constructively and not just academically," Fisher said.



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