

By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader

Once implemented, a new program from Juvenile Corrections and Prevention Services, 26th Judicial District, could put the district light years ahead of others in the Sunflower State.

That, according to director Gena Burnett, who presented information on a program entitled “Positive Achievement Change Tool” to county commissioners Monday.

PACT was originally developed in Florida in 2005 to help judges get reliable valid data to make determinations of which juveniles were in need of intensive supervision and strict sanctions and which ones would benefit more from a lower level of intervention.

Now, Burnett would like to implement the program in the 26th District in Kansas, and she said research says the assessment tool is validated when used with evidence-based practices.

“Basically, a tool that’s gone through a lot of research to prove the efficiency of it,” she said. “It reduces the biases that our workers can have because they all can have different decisions. Every worker, no matter how different they are, should come up with the same assessment.”

Burnett said PACT also reduces many systematic errors.

“When our kids are arrested, they’ll actually be able to go through this assessment,” she said. “The kids in the family are reached at a much sooner rate than they are by the time they actually get to sentencing.”

Burnett said sometimes, the court can actually take up to a year to get through the sentencing phase with juveniles.

“By that time, the families are at their wit’s end, and they needed help much earlier,” she said. “Through this tool, we’ll be able to do that I believe.”

Burnett said PACT will likewise determine if kids are eligible for intervention.

“If they are a first time offender and they are moderate to low risk based on our pre-assessment with this tool, then they’ll be eligible for intervention,” she said. “If they complete the program, they will never go to court on that crime. This kind of reduces the court case load, the docket.”

The Supreme Court recently came out with a ruling that every juvenile is entitled to a jury trial, and Burnett said this could add to already busy dockets in many courtrooms.

She added with PACT, JCAPS officials can look at risk principles.

“That’s kind of a money thing,” she said. “We should be targeting the actual services the kids need with their risk. If they’re high risk, they should be the ones we’re spending the money on providing the services for.”

PACT also helps officials better locate and distribute money more effectively.

“We’re going to quit providing the services that are not necessary to the low risk kids,” Burnett said.

She said after risk is determined, needs are next identified.

“That’s how we tailor what the kids get,” she said.

Burnett said barriers can also be identified with PACT.

“If they have a learning disability or even if their motivation is terrible, we can address those things so they’re more successful throughout their supervision program,” she said.

Burnett said pre-assessment can help with sentencing alternatives and developing a case plan.

“This is not a tool to diagnose mental health problems or drug and alcohol,” she said. “It’s just to let us know that further assessment may be necessary in that area.”

Burnett said PACT actually came from an assessment tool in the state of Washington, and it has been validated for quite some time.

“Every kid that comes through our intake will be eligible for the pre- assessment,” she said. “If they’re eligible for intervention, they’ll have the full assessment.”

Burnett said baseline data indicates PACT will change the number of adjudications for first-time offenders by 25 percent.

“We’re saying that 25 percent of our kids will complete this program successfully,” she said.

Burnett said when youth come into the system, they will have a pre- screen, and when they leave, they will have an exit screen.

“We’ll be able to know with each individual youth if we actually lowered their risk,” she said.

Commission chairman Shannon Francis said he believes PACT could be a step in the right direction for the local crime problem.

“This isn’t easy to solve, but we started out second worst crime in the state, and that’s not acceptable,” he said.

Burnett said with quality time spent in the beginning, a large amount of time and paperwork will be saved.

She said she has modeled her program after one in Garden City, but she said this one is even newer than that one.

“Theirs does not come with a case plan,” she said.

Something which Burnett said hers will. She added she and other JCAPS officials visited other detention centers in the state, and she said those places are not using detention assessments.

“I spent a lot of time in Wichita because they are at the front end of all of this,” she said. “They do assessments in the beginning. I do believe that we are light years ahead. I really do feel we’re going to be leaps and bounds ahead of the other districts.”

Burnett said Monday’s presentation was basically an opportunity to go back in front of the commission to discuss PACT so the board can approve the program.

“Once we get the funding, if they approve it, then we’ll get the PACT,” she said.

The Leader obtained information from Burnett collected from school districts concerning risk/protective factors and supporting factors as JCAPS applies for a Kansas Communities That Care grant, which will help start PACT.

“Basically, it’s just tests,” she said. “They take these in school.

It’s for 10th and 12th. They skip a grade. This is the results they have.”

According to statistics from the CTC grant application, with the exception of 2005 in Seward County, since 2001, both Seward and Grant counties have been consistently higher than the state of Kansas in both academic failure and behaviors/gang involvement.

“We pulled Seward and Grant because those are our highest populated counties within our district,” she said.