

# SOUTHWEST JOURNAL

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## Early interventions

By Mary O'Regan

### *City's new Juvenile Supervision Center provides youth with alternatives to trouble*

On Feb. 20, 15-year-old Tiffany got caught skipping school. She shuffled into the new Juvenile Supervision Center (JSC) in the basement of City Hall at 11:10 a.m., her eyes red and puffy, with two city cops leading the way. "Why are you crying?" Officer Christy Nelson asked as the JSC advocates wrote down Tiffany's information and collected her coat.

"I'm not crying," she responded, wiping tears from her eyes.

Tall and heavysset, with long, black hair pulled into a ponytail on the top of her head, Tiffany, whose real name we are not using to protect her identity, is one of more than 400 youth who broke the rules and wound up warming a chair in the JSC since its opening in January.

The center at 350 S. 5th St. specializes in dealing with youth who have committed low-level offenses, such as vandalism, curfew violation, minor consumption and shoplifting. Like Tiffany, 54 percent of juveniles who end up at the JSC were busted for truancy, which, unlike breaking curfew, doesn't result in a ticket.

### **An alarming trend**

From homicides to assaults, violent acts by or against young people rose across the board in 2006, indicating a troubling, citywide trend. According to the Minneapolis Police Department, more than 9,000 youth between the ages of 10 and 24 were arrested for misdemeanor assaults in 2006 — almost 1,500 more than the previous year. Twenty-six young adults between the ages of 15 and 24 were victims of homicide.

On the day the JSC opened, Mayor R.T. Rybak unveiled the city's "Blueprint for Action: Preventing Youth Violence in Minneapolis," a 28-page plan listing the steps local government and community members are taking to curb the rise in aggression among youth.

The report lists four main goals: to connect each juvenile with a trusted adult; to intervene at the first sign of at-risk behavior; to help troubled kids who have gone down the wrong path; and to unlearn the culture of violence in our community.

"The crisis of juvenile crime cannot be arrested away," the report said. "Minneapolis must address youth violence as a public health problem and implement a comprehensive plan that engages the entire community to address the root causes of youth violence."

The only facility of its kind in Minnesota, the Juvenile Supervision Center was created as a preventative measure, designed to reach kids committing low-level crimes before they could turn to violence. City officials estimate that 4,000 young people will be brought to the center in 2008 from all over Hennepin County, but mostly from Minneapolis. Of the 400 kids who have been brought in so far, 68 percent are male. As for ethnicity, 65 percent are black, 11 percent Hispanic and 6 percent white.



PHOTO BY ROBB LONG  
*Officer David Queen (right), Tiana Hall (middle) and Jennifer Zacher sign in a 16-year-old male who was picked up for truancy at the new Juvenile Supervision Center downtown.*

## One-on-one

"They just picked me up for no reason," Tiffany told Direct Services Advocate Jennifer Zacher as they sat in a beige room with windows along one side.

Following standard procedure, Zacher asked Tiffany questions from a prescreen survey, such as why she doesn't like going to school ("I just don't like the fact of school"), how her relationship is with her father ("He's locked up") and how often she drinks alcohol ("Once a month"). Based on Tiffany's answers, Zacher put together a list of community resources, including where the 10th-grader could find a job — a common topic of interest among teens.

Roughly 20 minutes later, Tiffany's mother arrived from her job at the Hennepin County Government Center across the street. She wore a bright red sweater with a large eagle across the front and started to chuckle as her daughter approached. Tiffany's eyes welled up with tears.

"You ain't gotta cry, hon," her mother said. "I already know the situation."

The pair left a few minutes later after receiving some information about alternative schools, and the JSC staff began their next mission: ordering lunch.

## Trying to help

Near a tunnel to the courthouse, past the Adult Detention Center and down a wide, green hallway that looks like the entrance to an opulent bathroom, the JSC is tiny — crammed into a room no more than 600 square-feet. The intake desk consists of a plastic ledge attached to the side of a low-level cubicle, which is attached to another cubicle, and another, filling the small room. Youth are led into one of two waiting rooms that have cable TV, whiteboards and inspirational posters on the walls that say things like, "It takes an entire village to raise a child." Across the room, the southern wall has a series of locked doors that leads to Juvenile Investigations; a sign on one of the doors reads, "No weapons beyond this point."

"Our focus is on the services and not the detainment," explained Jason Carver, manager of the center. "We're a neutral party, and our main goal is to have the youth have a good experience with an adult. It is voluntary. They can walk out."

Only three youth have ever left, however, which staff attributes to the safe, comfortable atmosphere they try to provide. All of the center's 13 employees come from The Link, a nonprofit organization headquartered in the Harrison neighborhood and contracted through the city to run the JSC. The Link formed in 1991 through the shared dream of two former Minnesota Vikings and the late Leonard Lindquist, a former state legislator and partner at Lindquist and Vennum. In addition to running the supervision center, the organization provides a variety of youth services, from case management to sober housing.

"Because [the JSC is] so new, we're still trying to get to that point where we can say this is a success," said Direct Service Advocate Tiana Hall.

The center doesn't expect to completely eliminate juvenile delinquency, but finds achievement on a case-by-case basis. "If we can help one youth divert their path into the system," said Carver, "to me that is a success."

Before the JSC opened, juveniles were brought to the Truancy and Curfew Center downtown and held until a responsible adult could pick them up — referrals or resources to help kids better their day-to-day situations weren't part of the equation. The Juvenile Supervision Center has a much different approach. Along with providing a safe environment and treating youths of all cultures with respect, its main goal is to provide visitors with access to community-based services such as tutoring or employment. The biggest challenge so far, Carver said, has been getting all the local agencies involved.

"We all have the same mission: to help and support youth," he said. "It's just [a matter of] collaborating services."

Each juvenile and his or her parent receive a follow-up phone call 24-hours after leaving the facility to make sure they remember to use the referrals compiled by the advocate. But occasionally kids need more than one phone call, in which case they become regular clients.

One of Hall's current cases involves a 17-year-old boy from South Minneapolis who attended Red Lake High School during the 2005 shooting that left 10 people dead and 15 people injured. The boy's mother is dead and his father has been deported. He uses drugs to cope and hasn't attended school since the massacre. In early February, police picked him up at a store during school hours and brought him down to the JSC.

"It's hard to keep tabs on him. Everywhere I call he's just not here. I'll leave a message, you know, I'll stop by, he's not there, so it's been really tough," Hall said as she sat in her cubicle with the boy's file open on her desk. "I always have high hopes, but it's just about being realistic about what I can do."

## **Working together**

A couple hours before Tiffany made her debut at the JSC, Jerome, a 16-year-old from Maple Grove who was supposed to be attending a performing arts high school in Hopkins, got picked up at a bus shelter on Hennepin Avenue while waiting for the 12.

Officer David Queen, a truancy cop who normally patrols the Downtown area, escorted Jerome to the center's front desk and hung around for a few minutes. (Disclaimer: We're also not disclosing Jerome's real name to protect his identity).

Jerome handed over his puffy, camouflage jacket and rattled off his mother's work number in a surprisingly low voice. He didn't seem bothered by the interruption in his day, smiling sheepishly as he removed a Bluetooth headset from his left ear.

"Do you skip school a lot?" Zacher asked during the preliminary screening that followed.

Jerome nodded.

"How do you feel about being here?" she continued.

"No big deal."

As it turned out, Jerome works for a local Christian youth organization that helps inner-city kids develop life and business skills. He receives tutoring through the institute twice a week. The Direct Services Advocates were excited to learn about his employer, as they're always looking for new resources. A half hour after his arrival, Jerome pulled his coat on, prepared to go back to school, and promised to send them some information about the organization's programs and services.

"Good for you for being a part of that," Hall said. "I'll call you tomorrow. Have a good one."

"You too," he replied. He flashed another sheepish smile and went back to school.

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