



Gay Lynne Inskeep
Trial Courts Administrator

Administrative Office of the Courts
The Sixth Judicial Circuit of Florida

14250 49th Street North, Suite 2000
Clearwater, Florida 33762
(727) 453-7176
Suncom: 8-525-7176
Fax: (727) 453-7166

Public Information Office

Court System Expands Program To Help Juveniles

CLEARWATER – The Sixth Judicial Circuit’s staff in Pinellas County has expanded a program designed to prevent juveniles from having criminal records after they have been accused of committing a minor crime.

The program is called the Juvenile Arrest Avoidance Program, or JAAP.

For years, juveniles who have been accused of committing their first misdemeanor – such as shoplifting or fighting in school -- have been allowed to avoid having their case wind through the judicial system by agreeing to participate in JAAP.

Once they’ve successfully completed the program, typically by performing community service, their arrest affidavit goes back to the police agency that originally drew it up, so it doesn’t become part of a permanent record in the court system.

Now, the program will allow juveniles to participate after they’ve committed their second and third misdemeanors. With each successive misdemeanor, however, the restrictions and demands become greater. The number of required community service hours, for instance, increases.

And, after the juveniles have committed their second misdemeanor, there will be an assessment, to see whether mental illness or substance abuse might be playing some role in the alleged misconduct, said Michelle Ardabily, chief deputy court administrator for the Sixth Judicial Circuit, which comprises Pinellas and Pasco counties.

Circuit administrators were able to expand the program as of Oct. 1, because that’s when a Florida law went into effect allowing them to do so. Technically, the new law builds upon an old one usually sometimes referred to as the civil citation law, since it allows police officers to, among other things, issue civil citations to youths, rather than arrest them.

Now, roughly 1,200 juveniles are diverted from the court system through JAAP. With the expansion, roughly 400 more are expected to be diverted, Ardabily said.

The expansion of the program does not cost taxpayers a dime.

As part of the program, court staff will visit the schools where the juveniles are assigned, to make sure they’re maintaining good grades, attending classes and staying out of trouble.

Some of the juveniles in the program will also attend a special class, where they will learn about risk factors which may be contributing to their minor criminal conduct, while others will attend a class where they listen to victims of crime.

The non-profit organization conducting the assessments is Operation PAR.

Whether it’s for their first, second or third misdemeanor, juveniles who successfully complete the program will not have criminal records, and will have a better chance of getting a job than they would if they did.

“This is so a stupid act they later regret isn’t going to affect their future,” Ardabily said. “We’d rather they get help than a record.”

Some police agencies, such as the Pinellas Sheriff’s Office, have for years screened youngsters’ criminal backgrounds to see if they qualify for the court program. Others, like the St. Petersburg Police Department, have started up their own civil citation program.

In Pasco County, the Pasco County Sheriff’s Office screens all juveniles to make sure their charges qualify them.

The youth are then directed into the circuit’s Juvenile Arbitration Program, which has many of the same facets at the Juvenile Arrest Avoidance Program in Pinellas, including mandatory community service and the monitoring of school attendance.

As with the Juvenile Arrest Avoidance Program in Pinellas, the arbitration program has been expanded to include juveniles accused of their second or third misdemeanor.