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Court System Wins Nearly \$2 Million in Grants

CLEARWATER – The Sixth Judicial Circuit and its partners in local government have recently won nearly \$2 million in federal grant money, a development that will enable them to better serve wayward youths, battered domestic partners and veterans.

One of the grants, from the U.S. Dept. of Justice, is aimed at dealing with students who have just begun skipping school so their truancy doesn't worsen and they end up in the juvenile justice system.

Roughly 165 students will be targeted, said Michelle Ardabily, chief deputy court administrator for the Sixth Judicial Circuit, which comprises Pinellas and Pasco counties. Among other things, the students will be screened to see if they are suffering from some type of trauma and need mental health services.

Another facet of the \$600,000 grant, which covers a three-year period, is that a magistrate and two case managers will be hired to hold truancy court hearings at six high-risk middle schools, Ardabily said.

The idea is, by stepping in early when the students have missed only a handful of school days, the magistrate can prevent these students from missing so much school they end up in court, where an attorney with the school board would be forced to litigate the matter.

At the six high-risk middle schools, the magistrate will hold weekly hearings with the truant youths and their parents, as well as the case managers, to monitor efforts designed to ensure the students have resumed going to class.

Another grant from the U.S. Department of Justice focuses on women and men who have been subjected to domestic violence.

The \$400,000 grant, which covers a two-year period, both extends and builds upon Pinellas County's Civil Domestic Violence Court, where specialized dockets have been set up so judges can, among other things, closely monitor whether accused batterers have been attending intervention or substance abuse programs.

When the Civil Domestic Violence Court was set up a couple of years ago, a magistrate and case managers were hired in part so those cases involving children could receive extra attention. For instance, immediately after a hearing before a judge at which a victim of domestic abuse seeks a restraining order, there is now a second hearing at which a magistrate deals with matters relating to the children, such as financial support and

visitation.

This consolidated approach meant the domestic abuse victims did not have to go to court twice to deal with issues stemming from the same violence.

Two years ago, money was also set aside so an advocate with Community Action Stops Abuse (CASA), a non-profit agency that serves victims of domestic abuse, could be on hand at the courthouse in downtown St. Petersburg whenever someone showed up seeking to file a domestic violence petition. The advocate typically guides the victim through the process.

Now, under the new grant, there will also be an advocate from The Haven of RCS, another non-profit agency assisting victims of domestic violence, at the courthouse in downtown Clearwater, where victims can also file petitions for injunctions, Ardabily said.

Also under the new grant, money has been set aside so 100 petitioners can receive legal advice from one of two non-profit agencies, the Community Law Program and Gulfcoast Legal Services.

Meanwhile, in Pasco County, the Veterans Treatment Court is the beneficiary of nearly \$1 million in grant money, to be doled out in \$375,000 increments over a three-year period.

The money, from the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, is intended to pay for drug and mental health treatment for veterans whose cases are brought before the Pasco Veterans Treatment Court.

The services provider, BayCare Behavioral Health will ensure veterans receive, among other things, outpatient and residential treatment if they need it, and have opportunities to take advantage of recovery and wellness programs.

In addition, a Veterans Treatment Court specialist will be hired to coordinate services and make sure veterans are aware of the benefits they are entitled to through the U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs.

As part of the grant, efforts will be monitored and evaluated by the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida.