



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Florida program diverts troubled kids from court

The Associated Press

Published: Monday, February 15, 2010 at 7:34 a.m.

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Nigel Thomas was what authorities call a "status offender" as a teen, the oldest of five children in a Tampa family struggling to make ends meet.

He hadn't committed a crime, but he was showing signs he might be headed that way. He'd skip school, hang out with the wrong crowd and disobey his parents. He hadn't, though, run away from home or been tossed out of it — other typical status offenses.

Thomas, now 20, said his attitude began turning around after only three or four days in a program that's made Florida a national leader in early intervention.

By including counseling, parental involvement and, when necessary, shelter, it's designed to keep families together and prevent troubled children from becoming criminals, saving taxpayers millions.

The \$29 million program served about 15,000 children between the ages of 10 and 17 during the 2008-09 fiscal year, with about 6,400 of those spending time in a shelter. Juveniles charged with a crime are not eligible.

"It was a pretty good wake up call," said Thomas, now a college student and YMCA staffer. "I've never been arrested, never had a ticket."

The Children in Need of Services/Families in Need of Services, or CINS/FINS, program has drawn national accolades.

About 85 percent of those who spend time at a CINS/FINS shelter — typically two weeks — do not commit a crime within six months of being released, according to the state.

For those with less severe issues who receive nonresidential counseling, usually with their parents, the program's success rate is about 95 percent. There is one caveat — the state only tracks the first six months after the child leaves the program.

Florida TaxWatch, a private, nonpartisan budget watchdog group, says the program saves the state millions by keeping the teens out of the court system and prison.

The state contracts with the nonprofit, Tallahassee-based Florida Network of Youth and Family Services to run the program. It subcontracts with 31 public and private community organizations and 28 shelters for counseling and residential services.

Karen Miller, the Florida Network's associate director, said sometimes it's just a matter of getting the teens and parents talking to each other.

"You know, the biggest complaint of teenagers is what? 'My parents don't listen to me,'" Miller said. "It might start out with teaching parents how to listen and how to respond appropriately as opposed to just utilizing anger. Or, it may help the child understand, as well, where parents are coming from."

Other features are that Florida's program is statewide, provides a cooling off period at the shelters and offers immediate crisis response. In some states it can take weeks for status offenders to get attention and by then a family crisis can escalate, said Annie Salsich, youth justice director for the Vera Institute of Justice in New York City, which has studied the program.

"We very much believe that it's a model and a promising practice for other jurisdictions to refer to," she said.

Florida also has been recognized as a best practice by the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and won praise in a 2007 American Bar Association report that recommended diverting status offenders from the courts.

But there has been some criticism. The Legislature's Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability last year issued a report saying criteria giving priority to children who live in zip codes with the most juvenile crime may prevent the network from serving those most likely to benefit from its services.

Department of Juvenile Justice Secretary Frank Peterman Jr. disagrees. He defended the zip code policy in a written response to the report, saying it has improved service delivery to underserved minority youths. Peterman added there's been no documented denial of services due to the policy.

The program has also seen its budget cut about 6 percent since 2007, part of the overall spending reductions the state has made as tax revenue decreased during the recession. That's resulted in some services being cut back, notably in nonresidential counseling and rural areas.

After his brief shelter stay, Thomas said he continued to get counseling at least once a month to help him find out why he had been angry and how he could change that.

The program taught him "everything you do in life is a choice," Thomas recalled. "And another thing, there were a lot of kids in there that were worse off than I was and it helped me to even see that I need to be appreciative."

About 95 percent of children in the program are voluntary participants — that's the Families in Need of Services portion of the program — often after being referred by schools or police. The rest come through court orders — the Children in Need of Services part — for more difficult cases such as Tami Harrison's 17-year-old son.

He began receiving voluntary counseling from Family Resources, a provider in Pinellas Park, at 15, said Harrison, now living in Homasassa. He was in residence at least four times and received nonresidential counseling as well.

When he was participating in the program, "they were very, very, very good at keeping him out of trouble," Harrison said.

Eventually, though, he was arrested for stealing his grandmother's car on a dare, Harrison said. Instead of detention, though, a judge put him on probation for a year at a ranch for troubled youth founded by the Florida Sheriffs Association. Harrison said she's already seen a lot of changes in her son after just two months. If he successfully completes his probation he'll have a clean record.

She credits CINS/FINS with helping him get that deal.

"Without that, he'd have ended up on the street somewhere," Harrison said. "I have absolutely no doubt about that."

Copyright © 2010 Gainesville.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.