

By Kelsi Loos for The CapitalHometownAnnapolis.com

Anne Arundel kids in trouble with the legal system now have options to keep themselves out of court.

It's called community conferencing, and last June the Anne Arundel County Partnership for Children, Youth and Families tried out the program in collaboration with Circuit Court Judge Philip T. Caroom, Virgil Walker of the Department of Juvenile Services and Debbie Tall of the county police department.

"The whole point of it is to divert juveniles from the juvenile justice system," said Pamela Brown, the director of the partnership.

When a young person commits a crime, police, school authorities, or any other official can refer the case to the Community Conferencing Program. If it is a minor offense and all parties involved, including the victim, agree to the conference, a mediation is scheduled at a convenient location, Brown said.

Professional mediators from Baltimore Community Conferencing Center help the victim and juvenile offender reach an agreement regarding appropriate restitution. This could include community service or paying back money for a stolen item. The agreement is signed by the victim, the offender and the offender's parents, who also participate in the conference.

"We come up with an agreement that is community-based," said Brown. "When that happens, we talk about diverting the child away from the system."

From June to December last year, 215 cases were referred to the program, according to the partnership's records. All of the children involved have complied with the agreements made by the conferences.

"They all want to comply," said Ben Taylor, who organizes the conferences for the partnership. "It's a way to keep out of the (court) system."

Taylor and Brown also noted that the conferences are quicker and cheaper than juvenile court. Taylor said that while a conference can take up to three weeks to schedule, most usually take much less time. If a case goes through juvenile court, it can take about three months.

Brown could not provide specific numbers for the program's budget, but said the cost of a mediation is only the salary of the partnership staff and a stipend for the mediator. That's much less than the cost of putting a juvenile through the court system, which may include lawyers' fees and costs associated with holding the suspect.

The Department of Juvenile Services estimates the cost of detaining a juvenile to be \$446 per day. There may also be a \$80 filing fee and a \$55 juvenile court fee.

In addition to potentially saving court time and tax dollars, the conferencing program allows the community to be more involved in setting its own standards of justice, said Taylor.

"Victims have an outcome in the agreement," he said. "They have a say in the outcome."

When a resolution is reached, "there is lots of crying, lots of group hugging," said Brown.

Along with Anne Arundel County and Baltimore City, some counties on the Eastern Shore use a community conferencing specialist on a case-by-case basis. Other jurisdictions are planning to

launch similar programs.