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Assessment.com brings scientific approach to 15-county Northern California Probation Consortium

Shasta County, California, – The following is an article which appeared in the *Redding.com* online newspaper on May 20, 2008. It describes an implementation by the juvenile probation departments in Shasta County, and 14 other counties in northern California, of a new juvenile risk/needs assessment, the PACT (Positive Achievement Change Tool), and an automated case plan, the Youth Empowered Success (YES) Plan, in collaboration with Assessments.com. Assessments.com, a 10-year old company with clients in 26 states, is currently involved in similar collaborations with some 50 other juvenile and adult jurisdictions throughout the US, and has statewide implementations in Florida, Wyoming, Washington and Montana.

Training to help officers deal with juvenile offenders

<http://www.redding.com/news/2008/may/20/listen-and-learn/>

BY KIMBERLY ROSS

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The juvenile probation program is about to start asking tougher questions of its teens.

But if they're the right questions, deputy probation officers will better know how to get kids the help suited to their individual needs and prevent them from committing future crimes.

The Shasta County Probation Department is undergoing training this summer to apply "evidence-based practices" to its juvenile detainees beginning in September.

The training and software package, provided by Bountiful, Utah-based business Assessments.com, brings a scientific approach to corrections, Shasta County Chief Probation Officer Brian Richart said.

"Instead of doing corrections based on your gut, you're doing it based on scientific evidence," Richart said.

Shasta County is leading a consortium of 15 north state counties involved in the Positive Achievement Change Tool (PACT) training. Shasta County's portion is expected to cost up to \$189,400 but is fully funded by a Sexual Assault Felony Enforcement grant.

The goal is to prevent recidivism in an individual youth by accurately addressing what led him or her to trouble, said the company's director of communications, Jim Kelly.

For example, a minor caught with drugs may not actually have a drug problem but be acting out because of grief, poor parenting at home or bullying by an older relative with criminal ties. In the latter case, a child may benefit from some assertion counseling, Kelly said.

"What the evidence shows is you don't really want to treat the offense, you want to treat the offender," he said.

After a videotaped interview with a minor for an hour or slightly longer, a deputy probation officer trained in PACT can also determine if that child is at a low or high risk of recidivism. The questions asked reveal far more than traditional probation assessments, which tend to be brief and based on criminal history, Kelly said.

Currently, most officers "may ask about drug use, but they don't ask about how you use your free time. They may ask if you're into gangs, but they don't ask if you're in a romantic relationship with someone who may be anti-social," he said. "They may ask, Did you commit this crime?' but not Why?' "

In the past, a minor crime like shoplifting might not get much attention. But if the PACT program shows the teen who committed it is at a high risk for reoffending because of her family life, deputy probation officers can work to help both the teen and her parents, Kelly said.

"If they're high-risk, that's where you get your bang for your buck," he said. "There's a 50-50 chance that those high-risk kids are going to re-offend. Those are the kids you want to go after."

On the flip side, Assessments.com advises against placing low-risk offenders into drug treatment programs, for example, even if they were convicted of drug-related crimes. Doing so may only expose them to high-risk offenders who will teach them about more dangerous drugs and more serious crimes.

"Only about 15 percent of those (low-risk) people are going to commit more crime," Kelly said. "The best thing you can do for that person is not to treat him."

Shasta County currently relies heavily on drug and alcohol counseling and anger management programs for its youth offenders, Richart said. But that's likely to change if evidence shows

those treatments aren't appropriate. Counseling for post traumatic stress disorder may be called for instead if a child has been witness to or a victim of domestic violence, Richart said.

Assessments.com has also found that military-style "boot camps" for wayward teens are generally ineffective in the long term. They don't teach kids how to recognize and replace inappropriate behavior, control impulsiveness or react well in stressful situations, Kelly said.

Richart is quick to point out that Shasta County's Crystal Creek Boys Camp is not a boot camp for minors, however.

"They wear a uniform and live in a barracks. That's about where the similarities end," Richart said.

Rather than using a screaming drill sergeant to break kids down before building back their self-esteem, Crystal Creek juvenile correctional officers emphasize to teens how positive their lives can be, especially by teaching them trades.

Some programming may change at Crystal Creek as a result of PACT, but not the overall mission, Richart said. While the camp doesn't work for every boy, those who complete it have a low recidivism rate: about 80 percent don't re-offend before turning 19.

"You can't say that about boot camps," Richart said. "A boot camp sometimes does more harm."

PACT will also help deputy probation officers decide if a teen should stay in juvenile hall or be released to his or her parents. It will better track teens if they move and reoffend, but also in terms of whether treatments worked. That enables officers to alter their programs, spend money most efficiently and show legislators what programs they need for continued success, Kelly said.

"Shasta County may not have all the programs they need, but because they have this data, they'll know what programs they need and be able to make a case for them," he said.

After training this summer, Richart said his officers will start assessing kids in September. Next year, the program will be rolled out for adults in the probation system as well. -- 30 --