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Local juvenile justice commissioner discusses at-risk kids

Fewer kids are in foster care and group homes; meanwhile gang membership is on the rise.



Juvenile Justice Commissioner Lisa Hughes of Coto de Caza says educating both children and parents will help curb gang activity.

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Fewer Orange County youths are in foster care and group homes, though more are becoming dependents of the court. Meanwhile, gang membership is building. These are among the findings of the county's latest report on the conditions of children. The Canyon News spoke to Juvenile Justice Commissioner and Coto de Caza resident Lisa Hughes, founding partner of Tustin-based Hughes & Sullivan law firm, about these trends for at-risk kids.

Q. How is it that fewer kids are in congregant care yet more are becoming dependents of the court?

A. As a result of lawsuits and other changes in dependency and delinquency care over the years, there has been a decrease in the importance of congregant care facilities. The feeling is that children are better off with families than in a home.

When children come in to Orangewood Children's Home, they are assessed immediately and if at all possible, returned to relatives or caregivers. It's just a change of emphasis in who should be taking care of the kids.

Q. Are adequate provisions in place to ensure the safety of kids who return to their homes?

A. The reason that we have oversight and all of the agencies tasked with protecting these children is to answer this question in the affirmative. I don't think these children are at any more risk than they have been in the past. In fact, there is actually more supervision and observation now. The Juvenile Justice Commission and Juvenile Court try very hard to monitor these children and we see some good things happening.

A. What affect might proposed budget cuts have on at-risk kids?

Q. We have a greater population with greater needs and fewer resources to combat them. The budget cuts that are coming are going to be severe and I am afraid of what they are going to do in terms of overcrowding of care facilities and greater police response times for abuse calls. Cuts to health care, mental health, education budgets and creative arts programs will also have repercussions for dependency and delinquency children.

Q. With all the commotion about education cuts, the needs of at-risk kids seem to go unheard. How will they be particularly affected?

A. One of the implications of the lack of resources is that children don't know what opportunities are available to them. Somebody has to tell them they can go to trade school, or to the school for the arts, or to college. Children who do not have resources don't just pick up a newspaper and find out what's available to them. They have to be told. The schools do their very best to educate children, but educating abused and delinquent children takes an added step that schools don't often have the resources for. Yet, when we invest in these children, we save so much in the long run.

Q. What about gang activity? Is the county doing enough to deter recruitment and violence?

A. I am pleased with the results of the gang injunctions, which by some reports have seen crime by affected South County gangs go down to almost zero. But we need to do more. Enforcement techniques are making a difference, but there is also an education component, and not just for children. Parents need to be educated about the effects of gangs and how they can prevent their children from joining them. And we don't have to force this down their throats; they're asking for it. If we can create a public-private partnership, we can expand the limited county and state resources for this kind of preventative program.