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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Nov. 19, 2015

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Four grants to aid juvenile justice programs

The Bexar County Juvenile Board has received four grants to fund programming for children involved in the juvenile justice system or on a path that could lead to their involvement. Two of the grants will add two new programs to a growing number of specialty courts and prevention programs focused on treating the root causes of delinquent behavior.

“We are pleased with the federal and state support of our programs represented by these grants. With these funds, Bexar County will start up a boys’ mental health court and a school-based truancy prevention program, and will also continue to provide services to children in our New Life and Drug Court programs,” Judge Laura Parker said.

A Department of Justice grant will provide \$249,980 in federal funding to create a mental health court for boys in the 289th District Court operated by Judge Daphne Previti Austin. The Males In Need of Direction, or MIND Court, will divert young men who struggle with mental illness and whose at-risk behaviors and offenses have brought them under the supervision of the juvenile justice system. Instead of incarceration, they will receive treatment. MIND Court will complement the Crossover Court, a mental health court for girls that has been operating in 386th District Judge Laura Parker’s court since 2009.

“Bexar County has had a critical need for a boys’ mental health court for some time,” said Judge Previti Austin. “Many of the children referred to our courts have special mental health needs — more than 75 percent — with about 25 percent of our children having notable mental health issues. Boys represent more than half of the children presenting with notable issues.”

The second new program, Project Connect, is a collaboration between the Bexar County Juvenile Probation Department and the San Antonio Independent School District to prevent truancy for certain incoming 9th grade students at Lanier High School. The students cannot be under supervision of the Department or pending referral, but they must have a history of low school attendance, excessive tardiness or public intoxication. The students will receive services designed to increase attendance and decrease substance abuse in an effort to keep them from becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. The \$91,466 grant from the Criminal Justice Division (CJD) of the Office of the Governor will support the services of an Intervention Officer, a senior probation officer who will be housed at the high school.

The students also will take the Reconnecting Youth curriculum provided by Family Violence Prevention Services for a semester credit. Reconnecting Youth is an evidence-based, nationally recognized program that helps at-risk youth with self-esteem, decision making, personal control and interpersonal communication. The program also includes increasing involvement in healthy social activities and bonding through school as well as teaching staff to identify and respond to suicide-risk behaviors.

The third grant, also from the CJD, will support continuation of the New Life Project, a program that provides services to human trafficking and sexual abuse victims. The \$72,191 award will allow the Rape Crisis Center to continue to provide trauma therapy, counseling and psychoeducational services to minor victims of sexual assault and sex trafficking as well as their families. The court helps the victims, who are under supervision, recover and return to the community.

The Juvenile Drug Court will receive its 13th year of funding from the CJD with \$108,739 to pay for a dedicated probation officer, counseling and level-sensitive drug testing on children already enrolled in the Drug Court programs. The court has prevented 4,465 children from returning to the juvenile justice system with a new delinquent offense.

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