

Progress made by the Youth Diversion Project

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The Daily World

Posted Dec 09, 2010 @ 06:57 PM

HELENA-WEST HELENA — The Youth Diversion Project and the Phillips County budget were the major items on the Quorum court budget Committee's agenda when they met Monday.

The Phillips County Quorum Court Budget Committee met Monday to consult with Juvenile Judge Ann Hudson, Walter Darnell and Monteque Robinson concerning the Youth Diversion Project.

Robinson, Youth Diversion coordinator, described the beginning of the project as a "rough start."

However, over the course of five weeks they have developed a structure for the juvenile court.

The YDP was developed to help eliminate the repetition of young offenders going in and out the judicial system and providing them with options through Teen Court.

"We feel that these teens that are making these mistakes, that know that the offenses that are being made are wrong, seem to respond better to their peers playing the parts of the prosecutor and the attorney than they would if they were to face more serious actions in the court room," Robinson said.

Kaneisha Gilmore and Angelica Roberts are both juniors at Central High School that have volunteered their time into this program and have found it beneficial both for them and the troubled teens.

"It gives me a sense of power, being able to help make a difference in my peers life," said Gilmore.

"The program is only offered to certain troubled individuals who believe that they are guilty, and from there Robinson takes them under his wing, placing these teens with the proper sanctions and possible counseling in hopes that the teen court will introduce them to a better way," Darnell said.

Hudson has been pleasantly surprised with how well the teens have responded to their peers.

"At first, they seem apprehensive and nervous, but after facing their peers, they seem to feel more comfortable," Hudson said. "After they announce that they are guilty, a jury of their peers considers whether or not they meet the Youth Diversion qualifications, they are screened and a series of questions are asked by Mr. Robinson to determine if in fact these troubled individuals may require further attention in other areas such as counseling, work experience, or training."

"It really is a positive way to have your voice heard," said Roberts, "and it gives those who desire a second chance the opportunity to turn their lives around."