

# Treatment key for juvenile offenders

*Early diagnosis, help  
can reduce recidivism,  
according to report*

**By ADRIANA COLINDRES**

STATE CAPITOL BUREAU

Youths who have run-ins with the law are less likely to become repeat juvenile offenders if they receive early diagnosis and treatment for mental illness, according to a report released Monday.

To back up that assertion, mental health evaluator Gary Beringer noted that almost 90 percent of youthful offenders managed to stay out of trouble after they got help through a program called the Juvenile Justice/Mental

Health Initiative.

There is a substantial "unmet need" in Illinois for mental health services for the 10- to 17-year-olds who have at least one encounter with the juvenile justice system, he said at a state Capitol news conference.

Beringer was lead evaluator for the report on the Mental Health Initiative, which took place from Sept. 1, 2005, to Dec. 30, 2006, and involved 22 community-based, youth-service agencies and the Illinois Collaboration on Youth/Youth Network Council. The youth-service agencies assisted about 700 young offenders through the program, which was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and its Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The youths in the initiative came from all over Illinois, including Sangamon County.

They received such services as mental

health assessment, family therapy and individual therapy. Most often, they were diagnosed with attention-deficit, mood or substance-abuse disorders.

Gary Leofanti, president and chief executive officer of the Illinois Collaboration on Youth, said that at present, not all juvenile offenders receive mental health services. He said he hopes the state budget for the fiscal year that starts July 1 will include \$500,000 for continuation of services offered through the Mental Health Initiative.

"A timely response to when kids are in crisis, when kids are not moving in a great direction in their lives, can really turn a life around," Leofanti said. "It can really break the cycle of juvenile crime."

---

*Adriana Colindres can be reached at 782-6292 or [adriana.colindres@sj-r.com](mailto:adriana.colindres@sj-r.com).*