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Juvenile Justice Forum Encourages Agency Collaboration

Written by [Chandra R. Thomas](#) on Sep 14, 2010

It was a chance meeting, but highly impactful. Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) Commissioner Garland Hunt struck up what he expected to be a casual conversation on an elevator Tuesday. It turns out the man alongside him worked as a prosecutor in the state and had a lot to say to the newly appointed DJJ chief.

“He told me that ‘I know you all want to help out the (incarcerated) kids, but I get to see the victims every day,’ says Hunt, who took his post in May. “Don’t forget the *victims* too.’ I think it was great for me to have that conversation; to be reminded of that fact and to keep that in the forefront of my mind as I make decisions every day.”

Such dialogue – and more importantly creating an opportunity for representatives from various agencies across the state to communicate and collaborate formally and informally – was at the heart of a Juvenile Justice Forum held this week at the Lake Lanier Islands Resort in Buford. The event held September 14- 15 brought together juvenile judges, law enforcement, prosecutors, school representatives, public defenders, child welfare agencies and members of the DJJ staff. The objective was to have juvenile justice stakeholders discuss the challenges they face within the system. More importantly though, organizers say the goal was to have attendees create action plans that can be executed in their respective communities.



The forum brought together juvenile judges, law enforcement, prosecutors, school representatives, public defenders, child welfare agencies and members of the DJJ staff.

“This event has brought together all the components of juvenile justice; we believe that there’s a local approach to juvenile justice that was focused on here,” says **DJJ Deputy Commissioner Rob Rosenbloom**. “This conference tried to bring together regional teams to decide what the priorities are and to work on preliminary plans together that will be followed up on in regional meetings.”

Joe Vignati, director of Justice Programs at the Governor’s Office for Children and Families, the agency that sponsored the event, agrees that it was successful.

“I’m really excited about the work of the Council of Juvenile Court Judges and DJJ, coming together and working together to spearhead a forum that is going to move us all forward,” he says “It’s a really gratifying partnership.”

One exercise on day one of the forum entailed participants breaking off into four groups. For example, one was comprised of prosecutors and law enforcement while another was made up of judges and public defenders. Each group was charged with answering the question “what are the major issues facing juvenile justice in Georgia over the next five years?”

“It was interesting to see how the responses to the question changed based on your role in the system, says Vignati. “That’s why it’s great to have so many different perspectives together. This allows us to learn how to communicate and share information better.”



Vignati says each agency was encouraged to develop programs and initiatives that could be considered for funding from the Governor’s Office for Children and Families, an opportunity that will undoubtedly be in high demand in light of the ongoing economic recession and inevitable agency budget cuts expected in fiscal year 2011.

Attendees say a similar forum has not been held in the state since 2007. Although that one also included an enlightening exchange of ideas, this week’s forum emphasized follow up and the development of action plans to be launched on the local level.

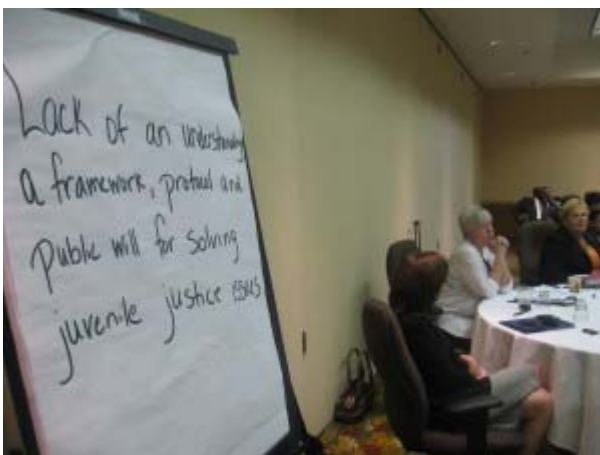
“We believe that there’s a local approach to juvenile justice,” says DJJ Deputy Commissioner Rob Rosenbloom.

Luvenia Jackson, a former Clayton County School administrator, says it was her first time attending an event of this nature in the state.

“Coming from the educational side I see the need for a lot of collaboration between agencies,” says Jackson, who now works as a court liaison for schools. “This meeting has raised awareness. There are a lot of well-meaning people (in this industry), but the flow of information to the right people is not always there. This has allowed us to have a conversation with each other and realize we’re all connected and can find solutions as a unit.”

On the second day of the event, attendees heard young people share their perspectives on juvenile justice and then broke into regional groups. Group members worked to fine tune previous suggestions and devise implementation plans for their respective communities.

The forum wrapped up in a large conference room with notes from brainstorming sessions plastered all over the walls, a visual reminder of tasks accomplished and the work ahead. Many participants said they were pleased with the overall outcome.



“I really enjoyed getting a collective approach,” says Clayton County **Public Defender Jerry Drayton**. “There are two doors into the system – delinquency and deprivation cases. We’ve been seeing a lot of crossover of juveniles coming in for deprivation and ending up in the area of delinquency. What’s good about the conference is that we’ve come up with a collaborative approach to dealing with both of them. We’re taking a statewide approach.”

The proposed action plans will be revised and developed at future regional meetings. Attendee Amy Shiver says she’s excited about what will come of the forum.

One exercise entailed participants breaking off into groups and answering “what are the major issues facing juvenile justice in Georgia over the next five years?”

“This was an enjoyable and pleasurable experience that opened up our minds to come up with creative resources and networks to help the kids,” says Shiver, a staffer

with DJJ in Ben Hill, Ga. “That’s why we’re here. The only way we’re going to save these children is by

working together.”

Got a juvenile justice story idea? Contact JJIE.org staff writer Chandra R. Thomas at cthom141@kennesaw.edu. Thomas, a former Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellow and Kiplinger Public Affairs Journalism Fellow, is an award-winning multimedia journalist who has worked for Atlanta Magazine and Fox 5 News in Atlanta.



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