

State association honors Lancaster County for helping young offenders avoid jail



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A state association recently honored Lancaster County's Operation Deterrence as a best practice for its work in helping young people avoid the criminal justice system.

The County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania on June 16 awarded the county its 2014 Juvenile Detention/Shelter Large County Award.

Created in the mid-1990s, Lancaster County's Operation Deterrence Program reaches out to parents of children not yet involved with the juvenile justice system but showing signs of delinquent behavior.

"This program exposes youth to the realities of the consequences of bad choices, including learning what it's like to come before a judge in a hearing room, and a day in the life of a detention resident," Commissioner Scott Martin said in a news release.

The program is free and has received more than 200 referrals between April 2012 and March 2013.

Many of its referrals come from the county's Youth Aid Panels, which allows young people whose offenses are nonviolent to go avoid the justice system by going before a panel of trained adults charged with holding them accountable for their actions.

"Youth Aid Panels, are a very effective deterrence method, with an approximate 12 percent recidivism rate," Lancaster County District Attorney Craig Stedman said.

"This process not only helps the youth to better understand the broad impact of and concern for their actions but also enables the community to be a part of the problem-solving process."

Martin said the county was honored by the award and hopes Lancaster County's example helps others.

"We hope," he said, "that other counties will find benefit in reviewing what we have done and are able to implement similar effective crime-prevention practices in their counties."