

Civil Citation Program gives kids 2nd chance

By Thaddeus Boston and Lori North

Sometimes young people make poor decisions that can lead to lifetime consequences. Having a criminal record can limit future opportunities in many ways, such as preventing a youth from entering the military or being accepted into college. Fortunately, there is an alternative to formal arrest for youth under the age of 18 who have committed a non-violent, misdemeanor crime in Charlotte County. The Civil Citation Program, coordinated by Charlotte County Human Services and funded by the Department of Juvenile Justice, gives law enforcement officers the option of referring young offenders into a program shown to be more effective than arrest for decreasing juvenile delinquency rates.

The Civil Citation Program goes beyond mere punishment. While in the program, youth are given several imposed sanctions that hold them accountable for their actions and give them the opportunity to turn their lives around. The sanctions fit the offense and can include completing up to 50 hours of community service in a learning environment, entering substance abuse or mental health treatment, writing letters of apology to family and victims, paying for theft or property damage, and receiving behavioral counseling. While all this may sound costly, it actually saves the community money. Because of partners like Charlotte Behavioral Health Care and Drug Free Charlotte County, it costs an average of \$386 to put each youth through the Civil Citation Program versus \$5,000 to process an arrest.

After successfully meeting and completing all required sanctions of the Civil Citation Program, the youth's case is closed and will only reflect the successful completion of the program rather than an arrest on the youth's record. On the other hand, if for any reason the participant fails to comply or complete his or her imposed sanctions within the required 90 days or is charged with another crime while in the program, he or she will be arrested and taken into custody for the original offense.

The Civil Citation Program often benefits the entire family, as active participation of all members is encouraged through weekly face-to-face meetings with the program coordinator. A mother recently recounted the experience of her son who had completed 25 community service hours at the Charlotte County Homeless Coalition. According to the mom, communication between her and her son was non-existent prior to beginning the program. But after witnessing what families who have nothing go through on a daily basis and the struggles they endure, the son was able to gain a new appreciation for his life and family. The young man's mother called Charlotte County Human Services with nothing but praise for the Civil Citation Program and informed us that she and her son are closer than they have ever been.

The Civil Citation Program partners with organizations that provide services. For substance abuse, mental health counseling, anger management and family counseling, the youth are referred to Charlotte Behavioral Health Care. For alcohol and substance abuse education and prevention, they are referred to Drug Free Charlotte County. For community services hours, they are sanctioned to complete hours at organizations such as Cooper Street Learning Center, the Boys and Girls Club, the homeless coalition, Charlotte County Public Schools and Charlotte County recreation centers. After realizing a need for youth mentors and positive role models, a new partnership with Big Brothers and Big Sisters has also been developed.

There are plenty of reasons residents and local law enforcement officers support the Civil Citation Program in Charlotte County. The youth in the program receive swift consequences and immediate interventions. The program increases public safety by reducing juvenile crime rates and freeing up tax dollars for the prevention and prosecution of more serious crimes. The program also links youth and families with the programs and services they need to put them on the path to a brighter future. Instead of classifying a youth who is going through the Civil Citation Program as a “bad kid,” that youth can be seen as someone who is about to change his or her life for the better and quite possibly the community they live in.

For information on the Civil Citation Program in Charlotte County, please contact Juvenile Diversion Program Coordinator Thaddeus Boston at Thaddeus.Boston@CharlotteCountyFL.gov or 941.833.6518. Lori North is the Charlotte County family services manager. Readers may reach her at lori.north@CharlotteCountyFL.gov.