

Officials rally for troubled children

By Ashley Meeks

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LAS CRUCES — Doña Ana County is facing a crisis far larger than the nearly 2,000 children arrested in the past year and the 242 now in foster care because of abuse and neglect, state District Judge Fernando Macias of Las Cruces said.

Macias and representatives of the county's judicial system, law enforcement, education, business, youth services and religious groups met Thursday in the first of two Promise for Success Initiative meetings funded by a \$250,000 legislative appropriation championed by state Sen. Cynthia Nava of Las Cruces, who is also the Gadsden Independent Schools superintendent.

The group hopes to have a plan by December to reduce the number of children in the juvenile delinquency and child welfare systems.

Macias noted the importance of early intervention: "When you hear that a child's been referred 10 prior times, what didn't we do to prevent those future referrals?"

Kari Mitchell, a chairwoman of the Regional Educational Initiative and the owner of Las Cruces Machine and Manufacturing, said employment was "critical" in freeing young people from the cycle of criminality.

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solution, or we can pay in lost product," said Mitchell, noting that the biggest challenge would be getting everyone in the community involved.

Vince Ortega, CEO of Southern New Mexico Human Development, said the committee hoped to identify and prioritize gaps in the system — like the involvement of a parent in the adjudication of youth.

"A kid will go into Macias' court and be sentenced to activity, but nowhere is the parent to be found," said Ortega. "It's not going to do us any good to treat the child and then send them to an environment where the parent's not around."

Las Cruces Police Chief Harry Romero said he was "grateful" for the collaboration in light of Las Cruces' juvenile delinquency rate, which is above the national average.

"The only referral agency is juvenile probation, and it's very alarming," Romero said.

Romero said police were being called on more to deal with social issues, like coercing a child to go to school: "When I started 30 years ago, it was simple, you could detain them for truancy or lock them up for curfew violation," said Romero, adding that was not the right response. "I'm hopeful that we have better avenues for youth at risk. The judicial system doesn't want to see itself turn into a revolving door."

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