

STATE OF MICHIGAN, 17TH CIRCUIT COURT
NEWS RELEASE



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Girls Court Launches in Kent County

GRAND RAPIDS – Treating youth through the courts requires a very different approach than with adults. The same can be true for different genders. Hon. Judge Patricia Gardner announced the formation of the Girls Court in Michigan's 17th Circuit Court today. The new program is a multi-disciplinary approach to serving female youth offenders by providing intensive treatment, incentives, and community-based support. With the coordinated efforts of the judge, probation officer, and surveillance staff, the Court has several goals: reduce offenses, increase education, and assist the girls in connecting with their families and community resources.

Female juvenile delinquency is a growing trend; however, the crimes committed by girls tend to be different than that of boys. Girls often commit crimes which inevitably hurt themselves, such as running away, truancy, substance abuse, and public disorder. These girls often return to their schools and homes without the proper resources to cope with underlying issues, and have a higher probability of committing repeat offenses.

Judge Gardner, who has been presiding over cases for 20 years, explained to the program's first four girls that she would be "tough" but "fair and encouraging" as well. As each of the girls individually appeared before the court, Judge Gardner reiterated the girls' potential and expectations. Members of the team assigned to each girl spoke about meetings with the girl and her family. Parents are involved through their commitments to appear in court and attend trauma-focused parent groups in the weeks ahead.

Each girl enrolled in the program must be willing to work with a mentor and attend therapy. "These girls will be given the opportunity to have a community-based support system for them moving forward," said Marcela Morales-Morris, Juvenile Probation Supervisor at 17th Circuit Court. "They will also be given the treatment to deal with their past trauma. The parents are also required to go through a trauma-focused parent group to help them understand and work with their daughter while building a healthy relationship." The girls will be introduced to many different experiences to enhance their ability to be successful including college tours, dinner to teach etiquette, and other culturally significant events.

The program is capped at 12 girls in order to make sure the participants are getting a higher level of attention. "The ultimate outcome is that the girls will successfully complete Girls Court and never return as an offender to the juvenile or adult criminal justice system," according to Kristine Westmoreland, Community Probation Officer for 17th Circuit Court. "In the process of working with them, I hope to build positive relationships between them and their families. The majority of these girls have a past that is filled with trauma, so they need positive support and reinforcement to remind them that they are valued and that the sky is the limit for them."

"When you come back, I want to hear a good story of how you made a good choice," said Judge Gardner to one of the first participants. "I want to hear of how you have learned to say 'no' to things which get you in trouble." With the growing rate of girls committing crimes at a young age, the entire community would benefit from some good stories too.

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