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MacDonald credited in youth crime reduction

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SANTA CRUZ — When communities across the country want to reduce the number of children they incarcerate, they often ask how Santa Cruz County did it.

Since 1997, the county has cut its arrest rate for juveniles by almost half. Assistant Chief Probation Officer Scott MacDonald has been involved since the beginning with the effort that brought the reduction about.

During the 1990s, Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall was stretched to capacity. Funding was available for an expansion, said Linda Perez of Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, which provides various services to help juvenile offenders. At the time, the state had just devoted funds to expand adult prisons. The county faced a choice, she said.

“Do we do the same thing they’re doing with adults or face the behaviors that put kids in the hall?” she said.

The county chose the latter, and MacDonald, then a probation officer working with juvenile offenders, was at the forefront of the effort.

MacDonald’s desk, crowded with piles of documents Monday, showed his willingness to take on challenges as large and complicated as reducing juvenile crime rates. However, MacDonald credited his boss, Chief Probation Officer Judy Cox; the entire Probation Department; and the community agencies that provided the services that seem to have contributed to the reduction in juvenile crime.

“It’s not about any one so-called hero,” he said.

Staff at the United Way of Santa Cruz County, which named MacDonald a Community Hero last week, agreed that numerous people contributed to the effort, but said MacDonald had been among those at the forefront. Sheriff Steve Robbins agreed.

“It’s a well-deserved award,” Robbins said.

More children were going to juvenile hall than the county needed to place there, MacDonald said. Ironically, that risked increasing crime rates as low-level offenders were exposed to more serious delinquents.

MacDonald and others looked to the Annie E. Casey Foundation and other national organizations that had studied efforts to reduce juvenile crimes. Working with agencies such as the Community Action Board and PVPSA, MacDonald helped establish programs based on efforts that had proven results in other communities.

The effort to reduce the juvenile hall population took two shapes: providing rehabilitation services as alternatives to juvenile hall sentences and reducing the period of time juveniles spent in juvenile hall waiting for a judge to determine guilt or penalties.

To reduce juvenile hall wait times, offenders who seem unlikely to flee remain at home while the Probation Department monitors them. Since that measure was put in place, about 4 percent of juvenile defendants have missed appearances, which means 96 percent might have been unnecessarily placed in juvenile hall, MacDonald said.

To reduce the number that served sentences in juvenile hall, the Probation Department and community-based organizations established “wrap-around” services to provide structure, supervision, diversion from criminal activity and treatment for dysfunctional relationships and drug addictions. Instead of serving a term in juvenile hall, children who break the law might go to counseling with their family, enter drug treatment or participate in weekend community service work or after-school activities.

None of the offenders who were diverted from juvenile hall have later been arrested for a violent crime. Of those diverted from detention, 2 percent re-offended, which meant 98 percent might previously have been incarcerated unnecessarily, MacDonald said.

Robbins gave qualified approval for the approach. For the majority of offenders with less-serious violations, the wrap-around approach seemed to work, he said. Though he expressed doubt that it could help sophisticated criminals.

Despite the broad array of services taking the place of detention, the approach actually saves money, MacDonald said. Juvenile hall costs about \$156 per inmate per day. The services provided to divert children from detention cost about \$65 per child per day, he said.

Following years of successful work on programs for child offenders, MacDonald was promoted this year and faces a new mission. His task now is to bring about a similar change in the county’s overcrowded jail system.