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Mediation program brings perpetrators, victims together



Mike Lenza, left, the Rev. Tom Hemm, Judge Daniel Gerschutz, Janet Mitchell, and Rory Stauber help introduce Bluffton University's partnership with Putnam County to provide mediation between juvenile offenders and their victims.

(THE BLADE/DAVE ZAPOTOSKY)

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**By JENNIFER FEEHAN
BLADE STAFF WRITER**

OTTAWA, Ohio - Sometimes victims of crime need answers and apologies more than they need to know perpetrators are being punished.

And sometimes offenders need to find out just who they've hurt to realize what they've done is wrong.

Working on the concept of "restorative justice," mediators trained at Bluffton University plan to begin meeting with juveniles referred from Putnam County Juvenile Court and the victims of their crimes to help the two sides come to a mutual resolution in the case.

"Restorative justice takes a little different tack and approach to crime and delinquency," explained Mike Lenza, a criminal justice professor at Bluffton.

"It views crime as a violation of human relations."

While getting the two sides together to talk is not a normal part of the judicial process, mediation makes it possible.

"Restorative justice, particularly mediation programs, help victims heal," Mr. Lenza said at a news conference yesterday announcing the new program.

Judge Daniel Gerschutz of Putnam County Juvenile Court said he has referred juveniles arrested for property crimes like vandalism to the mediation program. Both the victim and the offender must agree to participate - neither can be forced - but if the offender participates and completes his or her end of the agreement, the case could be dismissed and expunged from the youth's record.

He said he hopes the new program will reduce the number of repeat offenders who come before the court and cut down on what the county spends to house juvenile offenders. Putnam County, which does not have its own juvenile detention center, spends between \$40,000 and \$60,000 a year to house young offenders at the Wood County Juvenile Detention Center in Bowling Green.

"I think it'll save money. I think we'll reduce recidivism, and I think we'll all feel better when the day is done," Judge Gerschutz said.

Bluffton University, a Mennonite college with a focus on peacemaking and restorative justice, has hired Janet Mitchell, a lawyer with 21 years' mediation experience, as its first mediation coordinator.

She said trained mediators - some of whom are community members, Bluffton students, or faculty and staff members - will meet with the offender and his or her parents along with the victim to get them talking and help them negotiate an agreement.

Mr. Lenza said the agreement could include paying restitution, performing community service, or even things like having good attendance at school.

"It's wide open and that's the beauty of it," he said.

The Rev. Tom Hemm, pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Ottawa, gave his blessing to the new program, saying it encourages forgiveness and should help both victims and offenders heal.

Victims often feel isolated by fear, he said, while offenders are often told by their attorneys to keep quiet. Mediation will bring the two together.

"You can't force it, but I think just to allow for it, to have some system, some way to channel it will be beneficial," Father Hemm said.

While Bluffton officials said they were aware of just one other juvenile court mediation program in Ohio, Jacqueline Hagerott, manager of the Ohio Supreme Court's dispute resolution section, said several counties do mediation at the juvenile court level.

All told, some 200 mediation programs operate in courts across the state, she said. Some are geared toward civil disputes while others focus on family law, foreclosures, and even child protection cases.

"The key to mediation is it allows parties to be in control of their own outcome," Ms. Hagerott said. "As far as the courts and the impact on the courts, it's very efficient, but more importantly, independent of it saving the court's time because you're not litigating, it's really focusing on the public and what's in the best interests of the public."

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