



Mentor program aims to steer inmates' kids to different path

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AUSTIN — A new joint effort might not only change the lives of thousands of children, it might make Texas a new role model.

Gov. Rick Perry awarded Big Brothers Big Sisters of Texas a \$3.78 million grant March 9 for Amachi Texas, a program designed to help children of incarcerated parents by pairing them with a mentor.

The goal for the 20-month program is to help 1,300 children through one-on-one mentoring and to deter them from a lifestyle that could propel them to prison, like their parents.

The grant was disbursed to 11 areas in Texas, including San Antonio. Organizations involved are Big Brothers Big Sisters, Texas Department of Criminal Justice and the OneStar Foundation.

San Antonio-based Big Brothers Big Sisters of South Texas received \$430,000 for 200 children. The funds will be used to train and screen mentors and for background checks and field trips.

"Just spending time with a child can help them make better decisions," said Denise Barkhurst, executive vice president of the South Texas office. "This is a population that is in need." In most cases, a mentor will spend 22 months with a child of an incarcerated parent, she said.

The Criminal Justice Department reported that San Antonio has about 20,660 children who have a parent behind bars, said Olivia Eudaly, statewide executive director of Amachi Texas.

According to the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, children who have at least one parent in jail are six to eight times more likely to wind up there than a child whose parents are at home.

About 55 percent of adults in jail are parents, and about 58 percent of children of incarcerated parents are younger than 10.

The Amachi Texas program serves children who are 6 to 15, at the ages where a child's life and decisions can be most impacted by a mentor, officials said.

The program's founder, the Rev. W. Wilson Goode, said no other model has been proven to change a child's direction in life than the one-on-one mentoring that Big Brothers Big Sisters provides. There are many programs in the nation that help the incarcerated, but not nearly enough programs that provide support for their children, he said.

In 1993, Public/Private Ventures conducted the first national study on a mentoring program. Children who participated in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program were 46 percent less likely to use drugs and 52 percent less likely to skip class.

"Texas is ready to be more pro-active to the problem and provide a better chance for the children of these adults," said Darrin Jones, Amachi Texas marketing manager. "We need this program to stop the never-ending cycle of incarceration."