

## **Grant to help county juveniles**

**An experimental program is forming to test the benefits of family counseling sessions for Montgomery County juveniles on probation for substance abuse.**

**By: Lucretia Fernandez, Courier staff**

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Assertive Community Care is an approach to helping children address their problems with the support of their parents, as well as an effort to deter siblings from engaging in similar behaviors. Sam Houston State University recently received a \$297,959 grant from the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Association, which is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to begin experimenting with the program and evaluate its effectiveness for Montgomery County juveniles.

The research project, a collaborative effort between the university, The Phoenix House and the Montgomery County Juvenile Probation Department, will officially begin in February under the direction of SHSU Assistant Professor of Psychology Craig Henderson.

"Our site is unique in that we are conducting a randomized control trial which means we will have a high level of experimental control," Henderson said. "We're really excited about bringing this service to the families. The government has made a significant commitment to this treatment."

The grant should provide services to 90 Montgomery County families over a period of two years, said Pandora Burnett, deputy director of the county's juvenile probation department.

Once a juvenile is determined to have a substance abuse problem, depending on the severity of the child's problem, he or she will be referred to SHSU to be randomly selected to participate in the project, Burnett said.

With family consent, juveniles who participate in the program or move forward in the current county drug court program will be monitored to determine their success.

A juvenile will only participate in the research project for six months. During the first three months, the entire family will participate in at-home counseling, two to three times a week. The following months, the counseling sessions will decrease but a case manager will continually check in to determine how a juvenile is doing, Burnett said.

"If it's successful, we could branch this out into other services as well," Burnett said.

Juvenile probation department Director Ron Leach also thinks the department may combine the at-home counseling with the drug court in the future.

Several areas in Texas and across the nation have already tested similar programs and have all reported favorable results, Henderson said. Cities that have received federal grant money to support such projects in the past include Laredo, San Antonio and Houston. A national study of such sites, released five years ago, also reported that family-based programs are more cost-effective, Henderson said.

Henderson initiated the project when he saw an advertisement for family-centered treatment. "With kids you can't always wait for them to come in, and this will allow us to go to them," Henderson said.

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