

Collier's Truancy Court getting students to stop cutting class

By KATHERINE ALBERS

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NAPLES — Circuit Court Judge Ramiro Mañalich knew he would be dealing with truant youths when he took the reins at Truancy Court in January.

But, he told the members of the League of Women Voters on Monday, he was not prepared for what he saw in front of him.

"We often bring the tough cases first. This boy come in front of me and staff said, 'This is Johnny. He has had 47 absences and straight Fs.' I said to myself, because I couldn't say this aloud, 'Wow. That's really impressive in a negative way.'"

But the news wasn't all bad. Truancy Court is making a difference, officials said, and there are programs in the works to ensure that the 67,000 Collier County children under the age of 17 make good choices.

That was all part of the discussion that Mañalich, Sheriff Kevin Rambosk and Dee Whinnery, executive director of student services for the Collier County School District, had with the League of Women Voters in Collier County on Monday. Their presentation was "Delinquency Prevention in Collier County."

"This is just work you do not hear about," said Sandy Parker, president of the League of Women Voters of Collier County. "There are a lot of good things going on in Collier County."

The group focused its discussion on Truancy Court, which started in the county in February 2008. Truancy Court is a partnership between the Collier County School District, the Collier County Sheriff's Office, the State Attorney's Office, Lutheran Social Services, the David Lawrence Center, the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice and the Florida Department of Children and Families.

Habitually truant students are those who have 15 unexcused absences within 90 days, but a student may be brought to Truancy Court for missing five days in a 30-day period. If truancy intervention doesn't work, the student could face a judge, who may ask the student to pay a fine, perform community service hours, have his or her driver's license revoked or may suggest alternative education.

Officials say the problem extends beyond the students. Parents also can be affected by Truancy Court if they are aware that their child is habitually truant and they fail to get involved. If they fail, they can be convicted of a second-degree misdemeanor and serve up to 60 days in jail.

"The mission of the court is to achieve compliance so that these children have a future," said Mañalich.

When students come into Truancy Court, they are given a drug test. Sgt. Tom Wedlock, the supervisor of the Collier County Juveniles at Risk program, said at several court sessions, 80 percent of the students have tested positive for drugs.

That elicited some gasps from the audience, who caught their breath again when they were told that a sixth-grader had tested positive for drugs.

Since its inception through April 13, Truancy Court has seen 175 Collier County students pass through its doors. The students are almost equally split male and female. The majority of the students who come to Truancy Court are Hispanic followed by white students.

But there is also good news. The percentage of truant students who are truant after their parents receive the petition to go to court falls 48 percent. After they make their first appearance in court, 54 percent of the students do not have a truancy problem again.

Whinnery said one way to combat problems with youth in the community is to increase the activities that students have available to them when they are out of school.

"You ask what you can do? We have some thoughts," she said.

Rambosk said the Collier County Sheriff's Office wants to engage children in activities that are positive. He told the crowd that his office was looking to start a program called Hot Summer Nights, which would allow children in multiple locations to get together, watch movies, play games or sports and listen to music. He said the evenings would also give the Sheriff's Office an opportunity to work with the children and get to know them.

"We are seeking more positive contacts with young people," he said.

But how long programs like that can last is up in the air. When asked about the budget, Rambosk admitted that his budget was looking to take, in the worst case scenario, a \$40 million cut.

While he said he does not think the cut will be that deep, he did say programs like youth services could see cuts.

"We are looking at consolidating some functions that will make up 5 percent of our operating budget, or \$7 million, without significant impacts to services," he said. "We will need your support."