

Focus on Local Practice: What's New at Juvenile Court for Caddo Parish

By Hal Odom, Jr.

This time, we're not talking about the First JDC courthouse. No, we're talking about a separate, free-standing complex about one mile south of downtown Shreveport on Spring Street (La. Hwy. 1), just past a tall alluvial ridge. Although the first Juvenile Court for Caddo Parish was established by the Legislature in 1922, the current, modern facility was built in 1990. And much of it is newer than that.

The most striking and innovative new feature of the facility is the Calming Studio. This room, a former overflow courtroom, has been completely reconceived and remodeled as an area for children who may have experienced trauma. Inside, they are sheltered from witnesses and law enforcement. Beaming from the ceiling is an interactive floor projection which creates the impression of looking down into an aquarium. When children reach for a fish, the water splashes and the fish dart away! This effect is impressive, and it even seems to break through to children who are hardened by fairly graphic video games. There is also a sitting nook, infinity panels and a bubble tower. Members of Volunteers for Youth Justice may even stroll in carrying Sasha, the therapy dog. The day I visited, this caused a sensation.

The Calming Studio cost about \$100,000 and was designed by Sensory One in Canada and Mike Ayres Co. in the United Kingdom. Funding came from Caddo Parish Juvenile Services, Volunteers for Youth Justice, the Caddo Parish Commission and from individual donors. In light of the obvious benefit to highly vulnerable children, this is money well spent.

For the basics: The building houses three courtrooms, the clerk's office, probation services and a 24-bed detention center. An initiative, started in 2013, is to use detention only for violent crimes, like armed robbery, rape and murder, and for repeat offenders, but not for minor offenses like school fights and shoplifting. This has kept the center's "occupancy" down to an average of 22 per night. Clay Walker, director of juvenile services, provided statistics that, since 2013, major crimes committed by juveniles have decreased 10% and minor crimes by 38%, and the recidivism rate (repeat offense within one year) is now 19%, down from 33% 15 years ago.

These may be national trends, but Walker ascribed Caddo's success to "our easy collaboration with the District Attorney, mayor, school board, LSU Medical Center and any other entities that are in a position to spot and prevent juvenile crime."

The court has exclusive original juvenile jurisdiction, hearing juvenile delinquency cases, Family in Need of Services (FINS) cases and Child in Need of Care (CINC) cases. It also exercises domestic violence jurisdiction if there is a child involved, and jurisdiction for child support and adoptions.



The bubble column in the Calming Studio offers a whole spectrum of soothing colors, all at the user's command.
Photo by Hal Odom, Jr.



Sasha, the emotional support puppy, and her handler, Lucinda Miles, pay regular visits to the Calming Studio. Photo by Hal Odom, Jr.



The floor projection in the Calming Studio is touch-sensitive and interactive. When a user reaches for a fish, it briskly swims away. *Photo by Hal Odom, Jr.*

There are also nine specialty courts — Juvenile Drug Court, two Family Preservation Courts, Domestic Violence Court, Juvenile Mental Health Court, Truancy Court, Juvenile Traffic Court, Good Support Program and Succeeding Through Achievement and Resilience (STAR) Court for sex trafficking. For more details about the STAR Court, read the interview with Judge Ree J. Casey-Jones in this issue of *Louisiana Bar Journal* (page 186). All in all, it's a very busy place.

The Family Preservation Courts are for adults. Family Preservation Court I is essentially an adult drug court. "In the average CINC case," Walker said, "the claim is abuse and neglect, but the problem is substance abuse. Our approach is to work with the parents and try to get them sober and employed. If they manage this for one year, they graduate from the program, and it's much easier for them to get their kids back."

Family Preservation Court II is for other cases like child support and delinquency. Keeping with the overarching philosophy of trauma-informed

practice, the judges and court personnel try to address the underlying problem. Once again, substance abuse treatment is key. For more information about trauma-informed practice, read the article by Judge David N. Matlock and court administrator A. Michelle Perkins in this issue of *Louisiana Bar Journal* (beginning on page 182).

Not everything here is "new and improved." For example, the court has printed a handbook for foster parents and custodians in CINC cases. While this paper-and-ink artifact might seem defiantly low-tech, it gives volunteers an outline of the judicial process, what to expect, definitions of legal terms and a list of important phone numbers. I have seen prospective foster parents staring as intently at this book as they ever would a smartphone.

Caddo Juvenile is dedicated to collaborating with local agencies, governmental bodies and other entities to make the system work. The effort, however, is statewide, as Caddo meets quarterly with the juvenile court officials of Orleans, Jefferson, East Baton Rouge

and Calcasieu.

On the day I visited, a contingent from the 15th JDC (Lafayette Parish) was visiting to tour the facility, observe the organizational structure and hear from NGOs like Volunteers for Youth Justice, the Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse and Step Forward, all of which work closely with juvenile court programs. Ted Cox, the judicial administrator and hearing officer, and Clay Walker gave an overview of programs and services. The interaction with the Lafayette delegation showed that information is best exchanged both ways!

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the Juvenile Court was the passage of the Raise the Age Act. On March 1, 2019, this began channeling 17-year-olds charged with nonviolent delinquencies to juvenile court; on July 1, 2020, it incorporated all 17-year-olds arrested in Caddo Parish. Based on projections, this will add 300 cases to Juvenile Court in the first year. The court has been working with law enforcement and the District Attorney's Office to increase diversion programs and reduce probation caseloads so these new juvenile offenders can be absorbed at minimal cost. Additional facilities — and taxes — may be inevitable, but the Legislature estimates that treating 17-year-olds as juveniles will yield a 34% decrease in recidivism.

The Juvenile Court for Caddo Parish is a busy place. But innovation tempered with tradition is the court's approach to meet new challenges and serve the children who must enter its doors.

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