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Richmond didn't use more than \$1 million in funds meant to help court-involved youth



In recent years, the City of Richmond has not used hundreds of thousands of dollars in state funds meant to help court-involved youth and reduce their risk of re-arrest, despite the city experiencing an upward trend in crimes committed by youth since the pandemic.



By: Tyler Layne

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RICHMOND, Va. -- In recent years, the City of Richmond has not used hundreds of thousands of dollars in state funds meant to help court-involved youth and reduce their risk of re-arrest, despite the city experiencing an upward trend in crimes committed by youth since the pandemic.

Before and during a juvenile's involvement in the court system, there are services in place to provide intervention and effective accountability.

Some of those programs are provided by the Richmond Department of Justice Services, but some advocates are concerned the city is not taking advantage of available resources.

"I feel like it's a cycle with the youth. It just keeps repeating on and on," city resident Mila Mcleod said about the frequency of young people who become involved in the justice system.

It's something she was familiar with as a teen. Mcleod said her childhood was troubling and at 17-years-old, she said the court sent her to a bootcamp.

"I started being more defiant and not listening as well as I needed to. I was losing opportunities because of getting suspended and expelled," Mcleod said.

At the root of her issues, she believed, were absent parents.

"That is the biggest downfall, because these kids will go out here and instead of for picking up what I said I picked up, which was using my brain and my hands, they would go out here and pick up drugs and guns and make a living out of it because they can't survive," Mcleod said.

Now, at 21, Mcleod said her life is turned around, in part thanks to the nonprofit Rise for Youth, which connected her to career opportunities and life skills.

Valerie Slater leads the organization, the mission of which is to supply court-involved youth and young people at risk of becoming involved with the justice system with the tools they need to succeed.

"If we invest in young people, if we let them know how valuable, how brilliant, how worthy they are, they'll respond to that," Slater said.

She's seen firsthand the positive impacts of holistic programming, something she said the City of Richmond is not providing enough of.

Watch: "It is so woefully deficient"



"It is so woefully deficient," Slater said of the availability of city services for court-involved children.

Decades ago, the General Assembly established the Virginia Juvenile Community Crime Control Act (VJCCCA). It set up a system of community-based services with the purpose of deterring crime committed by juveniles,

preventing youth from re-offending, and diverting children out of the court system while still holding them accountable for their actions.

Every Virginia locality participates in VJCCCA and receives state funding to help implement services. Each locality has the flexibility to determine which services it wishes to provide based on the needs of its community.

There are about 30 allowable programs under VJCCCA to include alternatives to sending juveniles to a detention facility, programs that enhance behavioral skills, and services that promote accountability.

Under the act last year, Henrico County provided 14 programs including anger management, mental health services, parenting coaching, and mentoring.

Chesterfield County offered 11 programs including social activities, substance use evaluations, and restorative justice.

The City of Richmond had three that were operational: community service, community monitoring, and electronic monitoring.

"If all you're doing is putting an ankle monitor on a child, you're basically setting them up for failure," Slater said.

None of the city's services are prevention based, and they do not meet VJCCCA's recommendation of a "balanced approach" model since they do not include competency development programs which aim to "provide opportunities for juveniles to acquire or build on interpersonal, cognitive, and behavioral skills and strengths at home, in school, and at work."

Dawn Barber was appointed director of Richmond Justice Services in 2019, and her department is responsible for providing the city's VJCCCA services.

Barber acknowledged that some services have not been implemented due to staffing challenges in her office. However, she said the local juvenile court is

satisfied with her department's programs.

“Do you think there are enough programs for those court-involved youth in Richmond?” reporter Tyler Layne asked.

“There hasn't been any complaints discussed with my department,” Barber answered. “We work in partnership with the state and the Court Service Unit to develop programs based on this locality’s criminogenic needs that are identified.”

The state matches city funds to operate and administer VJCCCA services, and the city will utilize its local funds first before using state money. However, Richmond has not been using most of the funds provided by the Commonwealth.

Since 2021, Richmond has sent back more than \$1 million in unused funds out of the \$1.3 million received, according to data obtained through a public records request.

In 2023, Richmond was the only locality in the metro area to return funds. Data provided by the Department of Juvenile Justice showed Henrico, Chesterfield, Hanover, and Petersburg all maximized state dollars for their VJCCCA services.

Watch: Why isn’t the city using that money?



"Why is the city not using that money?" Layne asked.

"Funds are expended based on the number of referrals, so the number of kids we have in our programs. We just didn't have the level of kids that would have utilized all the funds," Barber said. "I just want to make it known that even though the funds are not expended, that doesn't have any effect on the effectiveness of the programs. We still run the programs."

The referrals come from Richmond's Court Service Unit, which is responsible for assessing juvenile arrests during the intake process and then determining the best course of action based upon the circumstances of the offenses, which could include referring a juvenile to a VJCCCA program.

Kimberly Russo, the director of Richmond's Court Service Unit, declined an interview for this story. But in a statement, she said the unit collaborates with the city and judiciary on VJCCCA plans and makes referrals "based on the needs of the community and the matching of services on the plan."

Barber offered her theory as to why her department may be receiving fewer referrals.

"The number of juvenile intakes have decreased over the number of years. So that is the prevailing philosophy, that if juvenile crime is down, there's not enough juveniles, which is a good thing, to refer to programs," Barber said.

"Is it true that juvenile crimes are down? I was looking through the DJJ resource data guide, and it says that juvenile felonies and misdemeanors are actually up over the past two years," Layne responded.

"And that could be. I'm just saying, as a trend, the number of juvenile intakes have decreased," Barber said.

According to the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice, Richmond's intakes have actually increased from 665 in 2021 to 915 last year, which included 280 felonies and 309 misdemeanors. The top offenses involved assaults, weapons, and larcenies.

Richmond's Court Service Unit had one of the lowest successful diversion rates in Virginia in 2023. State data showed 3.6% of juvenile intakes resulted in a successful diversion.

Richmond had one of the highest rates, compared to other Virginia Court Service Units, of juvenile intakes that resulted in a charge and detention order at 50%.

Barber said juveniles charged with more serious offenses may not be eligible for community services and thus impact diversion referrals.

Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney Colette McEachin, whose office only interacts with juveniles once a petition is filed, said "there is always greater capacity and need" when it comes to pre-charge diversion and post-charge services.

"It would be extremely helpful to have the option of temporary shelter care for juveniles in detention who cannot return to their home pending trial and need a safe therapeutic placement. Richmond used to have such a program and I don't know why it was discontinued," McEachin said.

McEachin added that the VJCCCA programs "law-related education" which teaches youth about the legal system and "youth justice" which reinforces positive peer interactions would be helpful diversion efforts for lower-level offenses.

Barber's department was set to implement the youth justice program during the 2023 fiscal year but had zero placements for the whole year, despite expecting to serve at least 30 children. She wrote in her program evaluation report, which was obtained by CBS 6 through a public records request, that eligibility criteria for that program had a "significant impact" on referrals.

In the current fiscal year, which just took effect in July, Barber said her department is working to establish weapons courses, decision-making courses, and prevention programming. She said she's also secured a grant to help with staffing and implementation of services.

In the meantime, she said her department is partnering with other city agencies that offer prevention programs for youth who are not necessarily court-involved.

Advocates believe maximizing all available resources will have the greatest impact on addressing youth issues and could be "transformative" in promoting public safety.

"Invite us to the table to figure out how to allocate resources and do more. Spend those dollars in the spaces that are doing good work," Slater said. "When [children] find themselves in trouble, if we are not providing them with positive paths, if we are not providing them with the instruction and

opportunities to do differently, then we can't anticipate that they will do anything other than what they've already done."

McLeod said it's her wish that more young people would have access to the resources that helped lead her in a positive direction.

"It's more ways out here that we can really get to children and figure them out," McLeod said. "It needs to be more."

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