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## GEORGIA LEGISLATURE JUVENILE JUSTICE

# How a juvenile program became model for state

**Clayton County effort has reduced offenses, cut taxpayer costs.**

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Quantavius

Poole was a school brawler, a drug dealer, and he was facing five years in juvenile detention.

Now, at 17, he is a sous chef for a caterer. He hopes to enlist in the National Guard so

he can pay his way through a military college. He wants to enter the Air Force.

The program that may have saved Poole, called Second Chance, is a blueprint for legislation to overhaul Georgia's juvenile justice system. It's



credited with steeply reducing juvenile offenses in Clayton County, and its supporters believe a statewide program could save Georgia hundreds of thousands of dollars per offender.

The goal is to divert offenders who are not violent or could be saved into community-based programs instead of locking them up. Even some who commit more serious crimes could see less time locked up.

As of Thursday, when the House approved House Bill 242, the state had 688 children housed in youth development campuses, which are akin to adult prisons. An additional 1,141

children were being held in regional youth detention centers, which hold children who are still waiting for their cases to be heard. The cost to the state is \$90,000 per year for each juvenile held in a lockup.



The legislation, which is expected to easily pass the Senate, calls for court-sanctioned programs that would focus on the reasons kids fall in with gangs, commit robberies or burglaries, or get involved with drugs. It would examine factors such as family dynamics and the existence of addictions. But it would also cover areas as basic as simple social skills, such as understanding the importance of a firm handshake.

Steve Teske, the chief judge of Clayton's juvenile court, said Second Chance has helped reduce juvenile crime in the county since it started in 2003. That year, 4,774 Clayton teenagers were accused of crimes, and last year the total was only 1,936.

Typically in Clayton, when an offender between ages 13 and 16 is brought into the juvenile court on the most serious charges, he can be referred to Second Chance. Each offender is placed under home confinement for at least six months. As long as he is in the program, the juvenile must wear a GPS device and face drug testing. He also is required to take life-skill classes and go through therapy sessions, both individual and group. Parents must also

agree to participate in group therapy.

A bad attitude can put an offender behind bars.

Teske made that clear to two teens during a recent appearance in his court observed by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

“I’m not about to let one of you ruin it for the rest of us,” Teske, wagging his finger, told the two.

One of them, a 16-year-old, was in the court for the fourth time for robbing a classmate of her expensive shoes. Surly and arrogant, the teen refused to participate in Second Chance’s various group sessions.

The other — a 17-year-old who had punched a classmate to take his iPad — had told his probation officer during his first week in Second Chance that he wasn’t “going to take any more (expletive).”

Teske, a member of the commission that made recommendations put into HB 242, told the teenagers that he would decide whether they could stay in Second Chance based on “what you say, how you say it and how you look when you say it.”

He gave them 30 days to change their attitudes.

If they’re smart, they will, Oscar Mayes recently told the 15 teens currently in Second Chance.

“Judge Teske’s not playing,” said Mayes, a graduate of the program. “I’ve seen him put away a lot of people for five years.”

When Mayes was 15, he and a “friend” held up a pizza delivery man for his car. Mayes was looking at five years in one of the state’s long-term lockups.

But Mayes turned it around, and today he’s planning to enlist in the Army. Meanwhile, he’s a smooth-talking salesman handing out business cards for a water purification and treatment business where he’s the manager for leads and canvassing.

He admits he could have become entrenched in a life of crime if not for Second Chance.

“You don’t want to give up five years of your life,” Mayes told the group.

Mayes is just one of the successes.

Forty-one teenagers have completed the yearlong program since it began. Of those, 12, or 29 percent, have committed more crimes or violated program rules. By comparison, 65 percent of the offenders who are released from a Department of Juvenile Justice lockup wind up committing crimes in the future.

Second Chance has achieved that success at a relatively low cost. The program operates on an annual grant from the Governor’s Office for Families and Children for \$74,900, about \$15,000 less than what the state pays to house just one juvenile in lockup.

While Second Chance spares the teenagers from spending time behind bars, it makes heavy demands on them.

Some don’t take well to the discipline at first. Bored, Poole continued to use and sell marijuana while under home confinement.

That all changed when Teske gave Poole a stern lecture.

“That’s all he had to do,” Poole said.

Poole entered a six-month military-style program that required him to rise at 4:30 each morning. He would then clean up the area and do some form of physical training, such as a 2- or 3-mile run, before eating breakfast at 8. Then he would work on a community service project or do some other activity, such as studying for his GED.

“I got in the program and stopped selling drugs,” said Poole, who graduated from Second Chance in January. “I found multiple jobs and didn’t get locked up.”

For Steve Robertson, the big hurdles were his anger and the required therapy, especially with his mother.

When he was 14, Robert-son and three others, armed with a Taser and a pellet gun, robbed a pizza delivery man of \$20. Two were caught that night, and they turned in Robertson and another boy. Robertson expected to get 15 years in prison — and he was charged as an adult with armed robbery and held in jail for some time. But prosecutors transferred his case from superior court to juvenile court, and he entered Second Chance.

During the first few weeks in Second Chance, Robertson was angry and refused to talk to his mother. “I hollered about everything,” said the mother, Rosslyn Glynn. “He might want to say something to me, but I was hollering. So he shut down.”

The program taught her to stop yelling and to listen to her son. When she did, he started telling her about his issues and concerns.

Robertson, now 19, will graduate from high school this year. He now works in an auto parts store and wants to become a mechanic.

When Robertson thinks about what Second Chance has meant to him, he pictures the sign each offender must post on the inside of his front door. It says “five years,” and it reminds each offender that when he leaves for school, work or worship that if he messes up, he could be locked up for five years.

“Freedom to me is everything,” Robertson said. “You’ve got to watch your friends. It ain’t worth it. Like I said: freedom.”