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West Bloomfield Youth Assistance provides alternative to court for some local kids

By: Mark Vest (/reporterbio/mark-vest) | West Bloomfield Beacon (<https://www.candgnews.com/newspaper/westbloomfieldbeacon>) | Published February 7, 2021

WEST BLOOMFIELD — A resource that could help shape the future for youth in the West Bloomfield area is probably one not all residents are aware of.

The nonprofit West Bloomfield Youth Assistance organization offers professional counseling services and conducts prevention programs for youth and their families who live within the West Bloomfield School District.

From the perspective of Stacy Panini, who is a WBYA case worker, “Youth assistance is designed as the prevention arm of the Circuit Court Family Division.”

Youth who have had issues with things such as retail fraud, assault, alcohol and drug use, as well as home and/or school problems, can be referred to the WBYA from schools and police, as well as parents who have concerns about a child.

The Oakland County Family Division Intake Unit can divert cases when they think youth assistance services are “most appropriate.”

The WBYA offers confidential counseling and referral services for those 16 and younger.

Panini has been a case worker for more than 20 years. She is assigned through the Oakland County Circuit Court Family



(<https://www.candgnews.com/admin/articles/temp-image/793b646701f9ec38923fa654bb8ab616.jpeg>),

Stacy Panini is a West Bloomfield Youth

Division and has been specifically part of the WBYA since 2009.

“Youth assistance, generally, would not be seeing a child who’s already in the system,” Panini said. “We’re trying to avoid them getting into the system. Most kids that I see are kind of a variety of either discipline issues, home issues or they may be what we call a prevention issue, which is an identified risk factor that makes them susceptible to some type of situation.”

In lieu of facing prosecution for something such as theft, kids can be diverted out of the system by participating in youth assistance programs.

According to Panini, consequences are similar to what they would be through going to court, such as having to participate in community service or writing a letter of apology, but without “that official court file.”

If a youth doesn’t show up for an appointment with Panini, she can inform law enforcement, and a decision will be made as to whether the individual will then face prosecution.

Panini is of the opinion that keeping kids out of the court system and offering youth assistance, as an alternative can be life-changing.

“For a vast majority of the kids that I see, they just need that wake-up call,” she said. “Some consequences that are firm, that are done by someone who is not emotional, not related to them, and holds them accountable for their actions. It’s been very successful.”

Chair Kelly Hyer discussed an advantage the WBYA can offer for youth.

Assistance case worker. The WBYA provides counseling services for local youth who may have been referred by law enforcement, parents or a school.

Photo provided by Stacy Panini

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“Kids need one other adult mentor in their life besides people in their household, as well as people in the education system,” Hyer said.

Aside from adult mentorship, being recognized for volunteer contributions can also impact the life of a youth.

The WBYA does that on a yearly basis via the Youth Recognition Awards in evening programs at West Bloomfield High.

“Youth recognition is an opportunity for teachers or parents to make a nomination of a kid that’s done something good,” Hyer said. “It doesn’t matter if you’re not getting the best grades. It just matters about your volunteer effort and what you’ve done to make a change to improve the West Bloomfield community.”

The WBYA is funded through support from West Bloomfield Township, the West Bloomfield School District, Orchard Lake Village and the Oakland County Board of Commissioners, as well as via fundraising and community donations, Panini said.

It began in West Bloomfield in 1969.

West Bloomfield Police Department Deputy Chief Curt Lawson served as the WBYA chair from 2018 to 2019. He is currently the vice chair of the organization.

“West Bloomfield Youth Assistance is led by a dedicated group of 14 people who volunteer for the benefit of kids throughout the greater West Bloomfield area,” Lawson wrote via email. “As deputy chief, I have seen firsthand how youth assistance can make a difference in a child’s life. This has been a collaborative effort by our school district, township government, Orchard Lake government, and by our residents who donate funds for programs that truly make a difference right here in our community.”

Panini, who has bachelor’s degrees in criminal justice and psychology, and a master’s in public administration, generally sees kids for six months or less but can have cases that last as long as a year or two.

Her discussions with youth can include topics such as behavior modifications, identifying risky behaviors and talking through ways of determining positive decision making.

Prior to COVID, Panini’s appointments took place in an office at West Bloomfield High School. However, she now speaks to kids via Zoom.

In her role as a case worker, one of Panini’s biggest challenges is getting youth to open up.

“Some of those kids come damaged,” she said. “So building that trust and allowing them to see you as an advocate for them or someone who believes in them and cares for them is a huge hurdle that you have to overcome. But for me, once I overcome that hurdle, I feel like it’s the greatest satisfaction, knowing that you’re making a difference in their lives.”

For more information, visit wb youthassistance.org (<http://wb youthassistance.org>) or call (248) 592-1278.

