

Helping Montgomery Families Initiative seeks comprehensive approach to truancy, suspensions

[Melissa Brown](#) Updated 4:52 p.m. CT March 9, 2018

In Montgomery courtrooms, dozens of Montgomery Public School students and families gathered, clutching color-coded folders and printouts as they filed into seats.

Students and parents were called up, one or two family units at a time, to speak with prosecutors and law enforcement officials.

They were all there for one reason last month: unexcused absences in the Montgomery school system.

The bimonthly courthouse meeting is the first in a series of steps the Montgomery County District Attorney's Office, school system and community partners take to reduce truancy and suspensions through a program called the Helping Montgomery Families Initiative.

"From a 2,000-foot level, our goal is to keep kids out of the criminal justice system," District Attorney Daryl Bailey said. "Almost every homicide we have in Montgomery, when I go and review their records, they were high school dropouts. You look at robberies, violent offenses, it's the same thing. There's some type of correlation between kids who are not in school and those who are causing problems in our community. It's a proactive program in terms of law enforcement, which is unusual."



Daryl Bailey, Fifteenth Judicial Circuit District Attorney, speaks about the District Attorneys newly instituted bullying text hotline on Monday, Oct. 18, 2017 in Montgomery, Ala. (Photo: Albert Cesare)

Every week, a collection of community organizations gather around a conference table in downtown Montgomery to look over suspension reports from Montgomery Public Schools.

While a series of unexcused absences leads to informational meetings with prosecutors and Bailey at the courthouse, more serious disciplinary infractions trigger home visits, where case workers use a scale to evaluate factors ranging from mental health histories to after-school activity involvement.

Law enforcement and school resource officials sit alongside child protective services, maternal health organizations, public health officials and domestic violence experts to evaluate the home environment and recommend next

steps.

"The great thing about this program is that it's not just about the child, it's for the entire family," Bailey said.

Two years ago, Keiana Jackson was at her wit's end.

A single mother, Jackson prided herself with how she raised her 14-year-old daughter Keiondra and her two sisters. But Keiondra had befriended a new group of people who Jackson didn't approve of, and she began to have issues at school. Those issues escalated to fights and a run-in with law enforcement.

"I feel like I'm a great parent, but sometimes you need extra help," Jackson said. "If you're a single parent, you don't have the other parent to have insight. You need that extra help. If she hadn't gone through the program, who's to say what she would be doing now."

Keiondra began weekly check-ins with a HMFI case worker, which refocused her goals of going to college and joining the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority.

"I didn't want to go through it, but I'm glad that it happened," Jackson said. "If any parent is hesitant to take their kids who are going through a hard time, it's nothing to be embarrassed about it. I'm not embarrassed to tell people we went through it. I know I'm a good parent, I'm a hard-working parent, and this program helped her."

Keiondra is one of some 4,200 youth served in HMFI's decade of operation. Program staff has made over 4,770 linkages to community resources on the behalf of those students, HMFI Executive Director Sandra Edwards said.

The Helping Families Initiative initially started in Mobile, when then-District Attorney John Tyson developed the program in 2003 as a crime prevention tool.

"At the time we were putting it together, I think it was the most

comprehensive attempt that was being made in the United States at the time," Tyson said. "I think we're on the right track. Our goal is for students who are manifesting the bad behaviors to change those behaviors so they're never included in the juvenile or adult justice systems. We want productive citizens."

Though its home is in the justice system, Helping Families Initiative programs are designed to be therapeutic, rather than punitive.

A 2009 study of Mobile's HFI program, published in the *Child Adolescent Social Work Journal*, wrote that the HFI program is unique in that a "preventive community social work effort is established within a criminal justice setting, providing a bridge between prevention and law enforcement."

Does a student have access to a clean uniform? Does a mother know which housing resources to access when she's trying to leave an abusive relationship? Would a father be open to attending family therapy?

HMFI tries to address these questions with relationships to more than 50 community resources at hand, Edwards said.

"If you have malaria, you've got fever, chills and nausea," Tyson said. "You can treat the symptoms. There are treatments from fever and nausea. But unless you get down to treating the malaria, you're not getting much done."

With the breadth of resources at hand, sometimes solutions are easy to drum up.

"It's not simple to the family, but it can be simple to us," said Theresa Green, current executive director at Glenwood, Inc. Green served as the project director for a Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant in 2008, which helped fund HMFI.

"I had a principal tell me one time she had a little guy come in who was acting out in the classroom," Green said. "He was sent to the office, and he was

sitting there in a wet uniform, because they didn't have any way to dry it. He was uncomfortable and miserable, no wonder he was acting out."

But many underlying issues are more complex, and HMFI looks to tackle them on several fronts.

Mental health treatment is a huge piece of HMFI's puzzle. Bailey said the initial teams were caught by surprise at the prevalence of unaddressed mental health issues in student's homes.

"One of our No. 1 needs as a community is not having a comprehensive child and adolescent mental health array of services," Edwards said. "When kids need placement, they have to go outside the county, which is a huge barrier to our families. Just getting the transportation to Hillcrest in Birmingham or East Alabama."

Breaking down silos among community resources is another puzzle piece, Edwards said, to ensure everyone has a comprehensive understanding of a child's situation .

Despite HFI's therapeutic aims, though, Tyson does consider it a "crime prevention" program.

Bailey sees the connection, too, particularly through his work in classrooms across the city for various mentoring and education programs.

"I know the kids who are going to wind up in trouble," Bailey said. "You see it in the classroom. So who better yet to determine who needs help than teachers? We know [truancy] is a big indicator of problems down the road as well. If you're not attending school, I know you're probably going to wind up in the criminal justice system."

According to state data, 16.57 percent of Montgomery Public Schools students miss 15 or more days per school year, slightly below the state rate of 17.68. Economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities rank, on

average, miss the most school days.

The state's data includes excused absences.

In its time in Mobile, Tyson said, the program worked. Eighty percent of students suspended for disciplinary problems were not suspended again in the following 12 months, according to HFI data.

The Social Work Journal study, which tracked several markers such as "Child Well-Being" and "Family Functioning," found that child well-being saw "significant gains," but "Parental Capabilities" showed marked improvement as well.

The study also highlighted a connection between Family Functioning and Well-Being markers with positive improvements in grades, unexcused absences and suspensions.

But the Mobile program has faltered in recent years due to recession-era budget cuts.

Montgomery currently cobbles together funding from the city, county, school system, DA's office and various grants. It hasn't always been easy sailing.

"Community trust was a huge hurdle to overcome for us, because people know we're the ones putting people in prison. They don't want us nosing around their family or prosecuting their child," Bailey said. "But it's totally separate from our prosecution. We don't use information they gather in any future prosecutions. There's a big wall between what HFI does and what prosecutors do. I want to keep kids out of the criminal justice system. If we can do that through this program, I want to pour as many resources into this as we can to make it work."

Tyson has asked the Alabama Legislature to include HFI funding in the Education Trust Fund to the tune of \$1.93 million. Similar programs exist or are being developed in Autauga, Elmore, Chilton, Calhoun, Cleburne,

Jefferson and Shelby counties.

Edwards said HMFII has seen success due to support from every partner in the program, and Bailey believe similar buy-ins from other district attorneys are vital for expansion success.

“The code of Alabama tells us our job is to prosecute people, not to be proactive and keep people out of prison,” Bailey said. “We do get some flak from other DAs out there. It’s more than the job requires, but I see a great benefit for doing it.”