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This new program to keep kids out of the justice system is a 1st for Maine

by **Callie Ferguson**

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Source: RABA Research Poll. Online survey of New Hampshire voters conducted January 27, 2025.

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Steffany Tribou, assistant superintendent of RSU#13, the district overseeing Rockland-area schools, stands in a hallway of Oceanside Middle School in Thomaston on May 9, 2024. Credit: Linda Coan O'Kresik / BDN

Rockland area schools and the city's police department have launched an initiative to keep youth out of the juvenile justice system, furthering the region's efforts to address a concerning uptick in juvenile crime and pioneering a new diversion model for Maine.

Late last year, Rockland police and Regional School Unit 13, the district overseeing area schools, established the Rockland Regional Youth Diversion Team. It allows teenagers accused of crimes to formally avoid the juvenile court system so long as they fulfill certain requirements to change their behavior and address the harm they caused.

The idea was designed in partnership with the Maine Department of Education with the goal of taking a less punitive approach, while ensuring adolescents are still held accountable, police and school officials said in interviews. State education officials consider the program a pilot that they hope to bring to other districts this year.

As for the Rockland area, the endeavor also aims to fill gaps in Maine's juvenile justice system that have frustrated local officials for years — particularly that the courts take too long to provide young people with meaningful consequences or the help they need to change course.

“In the meantime, children might get caught up in another incident, and another incident, and sometimes withdraw from school,” said Steffany Tribou, assistant superintendent of RSU 13.

The new program aims to act faster and put a “strong support system” around kids who are often getting into trouble because something is going wrong in their lives, she said. It is in keeping with a wider grassroots effort in the area to reduce juvenile crime by addressing its root causes.

Normally when youth are alleged to have broken the law, police issue them a criminal summons to appear in juvenile court. That’s where a judge may eventually order the teen to pay a fine or participate in a restorative justice process, to help them understand the consequences of their actions. (It is rare now for youth to be detained at Long Creek Youth Development Center in South Portland, the state’s only youth prison.)

But Alex Gaylor, Rockland’s deputy chief of police, has seen this process take months. In the meantime, a kid who started getting into trouble for small things, such as graffiti, might escalate to more serious behavior, he said.

Youth are required to stay out of trouble or meet certain requirements while their case is pending. Often for minor or first-time offenses, state corrections officials will divert their cases from court entirely if they meet certain conditions. But many of the kids who have been getting into trouble in Rockland don’t have the support to successfully make it through, Gaylor said.

“They need someone to be checking in with them during this time, someone that is literally going to say, ‘I’m gonna call you Monday. We’re gonna go to Shaw’s and speak to the manager about painting the side of the building,’ he went on, offering a hypothetical case of graffiti.

The new diversion program works like this: Police in Rockland now have the option to refer Rockland area youth to the diversion team instead of issuing them summonses to appear in juvenile court.

The program is voluntary, meaning youth and their families must agree to participate. Kids must also take responsibility for their wrongdoing. They are not eligible, however, if they’ve committed more serious crimes, such as violence or sexual assault. If they do not meet the terms of the program, their cases will move to court.

The diversion team’s new coordinator, Doran Wright, and the school district’s school resource officer, John Bagley, review referrals and schedule initial meetings with teens and their families. Wright has been volunteering with the school district and police department for more than a year in his role as a pastor with Straight Ahead Ministries, a faith-based organization that works with youth in the juvenile justice system.

The diversion team, youth and their families then arrive at a plan for how the teenagers can take responsibility for their actions and make other adjustments in their lives that might keep them out of future trouble. They might have to improve their grades, join a sports team or be home by a certain time of night.

The plans, designed to last three to six months, aim to fix problems in adolescents’ lives that may have contributed to what went wrong, but also “strengthen the youth and family,” so they end the process in a better

place than where they started, Wright said. Part of Wright and Bagley's job is to make sure these plans succeed by checking in on their progress.

So far they have had fewer than 10 referrals since December, Wright said. It will likely take years to measure the success of an initiative that is primarily focused on prevention.

Gaylor said that, while the community's efforts to better support its more challenging kids hasn't entirely reversed its uptick in juvenile crime, the overall number of incidents are down. The department's interactions with kids, once antagonistic, feels "night and day" from two years ago, he said.

Rockland officials helped develop the program with help from the state education department's Maine School Safety Center, particularly its recently retired director Jonathan Shapiro.

Stacey Barlow, the department's restorative practices coordinator, has been working in recent years to train school officials to adopt less punitive responses to student misconduct.

"Rockland seemed like a natural fit to do the pilot," she said, because of the district's existing "commitment to its most challenging students."

Barlow said she hopes the state can help establish at least another two diversion programs across the state so long as there is a way to sustain them.

To hire Wright, RSU 13 used money left over from a state grant that Tribou won in 2023 to start an alternative middle school program that, among other achievements, improved student attendance rates by wide margins. Those funds will run out in June, and Tribou said the district will have to find another funding source to keep his position.

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