

AG to announce new guidelines for dealing with less serious youth offenses

By: **ANGELA DELLI SANTI** (Wed, Dec/07/2005)

TRENTON, N.J. - Seeking to drive down the disproportionate number of inner city youths who wind up with juvenile records for minor offenses, the state attorney general on Wednesday was to announce new guidelines for police in dealing with underage offenders.

The directive, which Attorney General Peter Harvey was scheduled to announce at an 11 a.m. news conference, requires all 535 police departments in New Jersey to begin using an intervention known as "stationhouse adjustment" for juveniles who commit minor acts of delinquency.

"The stationhouse adjustment process allows police officers to resolve minor disputes without the need to file a complaint with the court," said Harvey.

The process typically works by having a police officer discuss the offense with the youth, a parent or guardian, and the victim. The idea is to have the offender own up to and atone for the infraction, perhaps by making restitution.

The process gives the youth a second chance without the stigma of a police record. Victims also get quick resolution, proponents say.

Acts of vandalism or disorderly persons offenses would qualify for the program, but drug offenses and other felony crimes would not, according to the guidelines.

The new procedure strives to address a disparity between how suburban and urban police departments treat minors who commit acts of delinquency. A statewide study in 2003 showed a disproportionate number of minority youths were in the juvenile justice system, though exact numbers were not immediately available.

A follow-up last year showed fewer youths had a record in communities where the stationhouse adjustment technique was used.

The Attorney General's Office said the majority of municipal police departments already use stationhouse adjustment, but that the number of minority offenders is inflated because of departments that don't use the procedure. Harvey expects the number of minority youths with a record will drop once his directive is implemented.

He said stationhouse adjustment harks back to a tradition of discouraging law enforcement agencies from taking to court juveniles involved in minor delinquent activity.

"The uniform use of stationhouse adjustments will give our local law enforcement officers an important tool to help get young people on the right track and build stronger communities," said Howard L. Beyer, executive director of the state Juvenile Justice Commission.

County prosecutors will be responsible for making sure municipal police adhere to the new rules.

Training for juvenile officers will be provided.

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