

# County attorney speaks about juvenile detention efforts

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## ■ Superintendent applauds attorney for truancy reduction work

by Anna Kurth  
Staff Writer

**HIBBING** — Hibbing School Board members last week got a first hand account of St. Louis County efforts to reduce juvenile incarceration.

St. Louis County Attorney Melanie Ford visited the board's Wednesday meeting to speak about a juvenile detention reform initiative her office is leading. She's visiting all the school boards in the county this fall to speak about the initiative and seek board members' support.

An oversight committee has been working for more than a year to develop an overview of the juvenile detention system — Arrowhead Juvenile Center (AJC).

AJC is run by the Northeast Regional Corrections and cares for juveniles from Lake, Carlton, Cook, Koochiching and St. Louis counties.

A study conducted for the oversight committee by the Haywood Burns Institute in 2008 revealed that a disproportionate number of children of color are detained in the juvenile system and programming is not always culturally specific, Ford said.

American Indian youths represent 2 percent of the region's population but 23 percent of the population served by AJC. Similarly blacks make up 4 percent of the population but 12 percent of the youths detained in AJC, according to a release from the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative.

Ford's office received a \$90,000 grant from the Minnesota Office of Justice Programs and the Annie E. Casey Foundation to enable initiative coordinators to research alternatives to detention.

The oversight committee is revisiting the county's guidelines for when to place juveniles in detention.

There are three reasons to detain kids — they're deemed a threat to public safety, likely not to appear at hearing or a harm to themselves, Ford said.

Subcommittees are working on a risk assessment instrument that will be a neutral way to look at kids

based on their family history and how many times have been in trouble before. The assessment will use a point system to indicate if detention is necessary.

Subcommittees are also looking at juvenile case processing to determine a way to ensure the cases reach the courtroom sooner. They're also rethinking whether it's necessary to detain kids deemed likely to hurt themselves, Ford said.

"The bottom line is we currently believe putting kids in detention does not change their behaviors," she said. "They do better ... if they are in a home-like setting."

It's best to find alternatives to detention because alternatives cost less and studies show kids do better in a home-like setting and often age out of trouble, she said.

Other subcommittees are forming to look at the county's juvenile justice system as a whole to see where minorities are being disproportionately referred to detention. To evaluate the referral system, the attorney's office is collecting data from schools, law enforcement, and elsewhere.

Ford said she wanted to introduce Hibbing board members to the initiative and give them a chance to volunteer on subcommittees. The committee's coordinators are stationed in both Tower and Duluth and meetings would be scheduled to accommodate volunteers from throughout the county, she said.

Chairman Tony Kuznik offered his expertise from his work with the law enforcement program at Hibbing

Community College, where he once served as president.

The college has a strong law enforcement program, he said.

Hibbing Police Department Chief Barbara Mitchell also volunteers on the committee, Ford said.

Superintendent Robert Belluzzo congratulated Ford for her efforts to reduce truancy in the county. She's worked with schools, police, social services and her own office to improve school attendance, he said.



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**Melanie Ford**  
St. Louis County  
attorney

See **County**, Page **A5**

## County: Subcommittee volunteers are needed

### *From Page A1*

"I appreciate that help," he said. "... I think she's gone far to improve student attendance in the county, and that's a good thing."

Ford in turn applauded Hibbing educators for their efforts.

"We've heard good things about Hibbing, and hopefully we can replicate that around the county," she said.

In other business directors:

- Accepted the resignation of English teacher Evan Sandstede. Sandstede has been working for Education Minnesota for the past year.

- Accepted the resignation of Kathy Ellich activities department secretary.

- Heard a report from

Activities Director Tim Scott about the Student Interest Survey of Interscholastic Athletic Activities students completed last spring.

- Received an update about teacher negotiations.

- Heard a report from Director June Hendrickson on Belluzzo's annual performance review.

- Welcomed Hibbing Police Officer Greg Benedict as the new police liaison at Hibbing High School and thanked outgoing liaison officer Sgt. Kathleen Cuffe for her service to the district.

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