

Treatment a priority, police say

By Karina Ioffee
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STOCKTON — Police chiefs and sheriffs like to say they are tough on crime.

But rather than arrest and jail young criminals, many favor intervention to keep them off the streets in the first place.

Such are the findings of a statewide poll released Wednesday, based on interviews with more than 200 police and probation chiefs and district attorneys from across California.

Thirty-five percent of respondents agreed most young adults their agencies dealt with needed mental health services, yet 64 percent said very few of the youths were actually receiving any mental health services, according to the poll, commissioned by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids California, a bipartisan organization made up of law enforcement leaders.

The poll also found the majority favored mental health programs as the most effective method in reducing crimes, more so than prosecuting minors as adults and hiring more officers.

"Law enforcement really sees what families need, because they are out there on the front lines every day," said Barrie Becker, state director for the Oakland-based Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. "They see the different generations cycling through, and they want to be a resource."

The findings are especially relevant since the passage of Proposition 63 in November. It imposes a 1 percent tax on incomes of \$1 million and above to raise funds for mental health programs in California. An estimated \$700 million will be generated annually.

San Joaquin County Behavioral Health Services will receive \$5.6 million in the upcoming fiscal year, and officials say the money is badly needed.

Earlier this month, the agency began holding public meetings to discuss the kinds of programs the money could help fund, including in the area of criminal justice.

One idea is to build a residential facility for teens who suffer from mental illness or abuse drugs, said Chris Hope, chief probation officer for the San Joaquin County Probation Department.

"We've been looking for a
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way to fund a facility like that for several years," Hope said. Minors with mental health issues who have committed a crime are held at juvenile hall because no other service is available to them. If they have a drug problem, they are simply released back into the community, he said.

Mental illness and drugs are common among young criminals, said Kim Suderman, director of Children and Youth Mental Health Services at the county office of Behavioral Health. Often, the two go hand in hand, she said.

"Many kids who are in the juvenile justice system are self-medicating a mental health

erman said.

Many others may have a learning disability that if identified early on could have improved self-esteem and kept them from acting out through criminal behavior, she said.

The community meetings will likely continue through the end of October. Any project ideas will be sent to the San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors for approval.

Chief Richard Bull of the Ripon Police Department supports Proposition 63. He says funding shortage for mental health programs has been a concern.

"We have been pretty frustrated with the lack of mental health services," Bull said. "It's

PUBLIC MEETINGS

San Joaquin County Behavioral Health Services is holding two public meetings to discuss how to treat people with mental issues who have ended up in the criminal justice system. The 5 p.m. meetings are Thursday at the Maya Angelou Library, 2324 Pock Lane, Stockton, and Oct. 5 in the community room next to Ross at West Valley Mall, 3200 Naglee Road, Tracy.

ting in trouble no matter how many officers we put on the street."

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