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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Lee County Juvenile Council to Present Community Budget
Requests to Legislative Delegation**

The Lee County Juvenile Justice Council will present five community budget requests for programs serving delinquent youth and their families at the Legislative Delegation hearings Thurs., Nov. 17. The hearings are scheduled to run from 1:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. at Edison College, Room S-117 (Taeni Hall).

The evidence-based programs totaling \$1.1 million will work with youth in the following five areas: substance abuse counseling, family therapy, intense supervision, trauma counseling, and domestic violence/anger management counseling.

“Counseling resources and diversion programs to work with troubled youth and their families are almost non-existent in Lee County,” said Kevin Lewis, Chairman of the Lee County Juvenile Justice Council. “This is the primary reason our Judicial Circuit has one of the highest commitment rates (to expensive residential programs) in the state, even exceeding those of Miami and Fort Lauderdale.”

Lee County’s fastest growing age group is youth ages 0-17, which is resulting in increased pressure on the community in many areas including juvenile crime.

“The County Council analyzed delinquent youth data that the Lee County Juvenile Sanctions Team (chaired by the Honorable Judge Sherra Winesett) had researched. The Juvenile Sanctions Team really was the catalyst for moving forward with these issues,” Lewis said.

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The Special Offender Committee of the Juvenile Sanctions Team looked at a wide variety of information regarding juvenile arrests and the types of services most needed by these youth and their families. For the few services that were available, two to six month waiting lists to get help are the norm.

“The Sanction Team found that many youth are committing more crimes while they wait to get the services that they need,” Lewis said.

The Juvenile Sanctions Team examined this information and recommended nine different services that arrested youth and families are most in need of at this time. These recommendations were forwarded to the Lee County Juvenile Justice Council, which prioritized the top five most needed programs.

“One of the main issues that the Juvenile Justice Council recognized is the enormous savings to taxpayers when these services to youth and families are provided in the community instead of in expensive residential commitment programs,” Lewis said.

The average cost to provide evidence-based treatment and supervision services from these five programs is approximately \$1,306 per youth and family. The average cost to house one youth in a Department of Juvenile Justice residential program is \$34,083 (DJJ 2005 Program Accountability Measures Report).

“It just doesn’t make sense to continue to send a high percentage of youth away to these residential programs, especially with a 42 percent recidivism rate for youth returning to the community,” Lewis said.

The Lee County Council ultimately hopes that these needed program services will help divert many youth/families entirely away from the tremendously overcrowded juvenile court system and reduce the number of Lee County youth being sent away to programs.

State Attorney Steve Russell also backs three of the court-related program recommendations of the Council. “The lack of judicial diversion programs and community resources available to these juveniles and families is certainly one of the primary reasons for Lee County’s extremely high commitment rates,” said Russell in a letter of support for the Council’s recommendations.

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Lee County Sheriff Mike Scott is also endorsing the funding of these needed services to youth and families.

The Lee County Juvenile Justice Council is comprised of individuals representing juvenile justice, education, law enforcement, substance abuse treatment, mental health services, child welfare, public defenders, prosecutors, faith-based, business and community organizations, county government, and private citizens.

The Council has been meeting on a monthly basis since 1996. Membership is open to anyone interested in the goals and activities of the council. Additionally, there are approximately 100 “affiliates,” who are individuals who request to remain on the council distribution list but do not have a formal membership.

For more information regarding these Community Budget Requests or information about becoming a member of the Lee County Juvenile Justice Council contact Bill Westel, Southwest Florida Addiction Services at 772-1211.