



Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

News

Administrative Office
1900 Kanawha Blvd., East
Bldg. 1, Room E-316
Charleston, West Virginia 25305
(304) 340-2305 Jennifer Bundy
(304) 340-2306 April Harless
(304) 558-4219 / TTY
(304) 558-1212 / FAX
Web Site: www.courtsvw.gov
Twitter: [WVCourts](https://twitter.com/WVCourts)
Information Services Division
Email: Jennifer.Bundy@courtsvw.gov
Email: April.Harless@courtsvw.gov

Statistics indicate Putnam judicial truancy program working

For immediate release Wednesday, April 18, 2012

WINFIELD, W.Va. – Truancy has decreased 60 percent in Putnam County since 2009, the year a judicial truancy diversion program with court monitoring began.

In the five years before 2009, there was an average of almost 380 new truancy cases each year referred to the Department of Health and Human Resources. So far this academic year, Putnam County Magistrate Linda Hunt has held 152 truancy diversion hearings, 60 percent less than in 2009. In the 2010-2011 school year, she held 184 truancy diversion hearings, 50 percent less than in 2009.

In 2010, a new state law reduced the number of absences needed to be considered truant from ten to five, which without an intervention program could have caused truancy rates to rise.

The Putnam County diversion program, called “Truancy Triage,” brings truancy cases immediately before Magistrate Hunt before they are referred to the DHHR. Previously, the cases were referred to the DHHR and then to court. Under the new program, if a juvenile does not comply with the diversion program in magistrate court, a petition is filed moving the case to circuit court, where Twenty-Ninth Chief Circuit Judge Phillip M. Stowers holds a hearing within ten days.

“The expedient involvement of the circuit court and the timely diversion hearing has clearly impacted overall truancy in Putnam County,” Judge Stowers said.

The reductions are not just a variance in the data because they are based on three academic years, he said.

“More importantly, of the 152 truancy cases handled by Magistrate Hunt, only 24 percent required referral to circuit court for additional services and supervision of the juvenile,” Judge Stowers said. “This means Magistrate Hunt and the truancy diversion program have successfully managed more than 76 percent of the truancy referrals. The juveniles that comprise this segment are successfully going to school, being drug free, and are on track to graduate.”

Judge Stowers called Magistrate Hunt, a former school counselor, “our secret truancy weapon.”

Judge Stowers currently is following 112 truants and Magistrate Hunt is following 60, to make sure they attend school.

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