



# The News-Press

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## Juvenile Detention Alternatives celebrates 10 years

**Julie Davis**

Nebraska City News-Press  
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Representatives of the Otoe County government, law enforcement, and legal communities came together Wednesday, June 30, at the Otoe County Courthouse to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI).

Otoe County has been part of the statewide program since 2016, when then-Otoe County Attorney David Partsch and Judge Robert O'Neal led efforts to become part of the program after 18 youth were detained in 2015.

Otoe was the first rural county added to the program after Douglas and Sarpy counties. The program now also includes Lancaster and Hall counties.

"We wanted a seat at the table to help develop a plan for rural counties," said Partsch, who is now Judge of the County Court for the Second Judicial District.

In 2020, only one youth has required detention services, and no youths have been placed in detention thus far in 2021, according to Otoe County Juvenile Diver-

sion Director and Central Navigator Vanessa Sherman.

Sherman said that the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Team, which handles the JDAI work, partners with the Better Together Cooperative in 2020 to further help families with juvenile offenders by providing assistance in overcoming poverty, which has been identified as a key element to reducing the likelihood that a juvenile would enter the justice system or his or her family would enter the child welfare system.

Family needs identified in a 2020 survey were clothing (28 percent), parenting support (17 percent), food (14 percent), household items (14 percent), diapers (10 percent), employment support (10 percent), and housing (7 percent).

Sherman assumed her Central Navigator duties in 2020, and further assistance was provided to families through youth and family coaching services. At present, the program employs two youth coaches and two family coaches.

The Otoe County Board of Commissioners have assisted JDAI con-

sistently since 2016, said Sherman, by approving partnerships with other agencies and providing matching funds for alternatives to detention programs.

"The support of the commissioners makes it possible for us to do juvenile diversion," said Partsch.

JDAI was developed to

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**Michael G. Heavican, center, chief justice of the state of Nebraska, read a proclamation declaring the weeks of June 21 and June 28 as Recognition Weeks for the 10th anniversary of the Nebraska Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative during a June 30 celebration at the Otoe County Courthouse. Heavican presented the signed proclamation to Otoe County Second District Commissioner Rick Freshman, left, and Otoe County Fourth District Commissioner James Parsons, right, at the conclusion of the ceremony. PHOTO BY JULIE DAVIS**

## JDAI

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allow youth involved in the juvenile justice system to be able to develop into healthy, productive adults. It does this by offering alternatives to incarceration, including probation, truancy management, and navigator services that offer help to both the juvenile offender and his or her family.

The national JDAI program was launched in the 1990s by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and is considered to be one of the nation's most effective, influential, and widespread juvenile justice systems reform initiatives, according to the Nebraska JDAI 2019 Progress Report.

The program encompasses eight core strategies: collaboration, objective admissions, data, alternatives to detention, case processing, special populations, reducing racial and ethnic disparities, and conditions of confinement, and those involved with the program consider it to be a philosophy going forward, as opposed to a project with a set end date.

During the June 30

celebration, Michael G. Heavican, chief justice of the state of Nebraska, read a proclamation declaring the weeks of June 21 and June 28 as Recognitions Weeks for the 10th anniversary of JDAI. He presented a signed copy of the proclamation to Otoe County Second District Commissioner Rick Freshman and Otoe County Fourth District Commissioner James Parsons.

Heavican's visit to Nebraska City was part of his annual summer tour of Nebraska courts.

Each summer, he dedicates several days to traveling to courts outside of Lincoln to meet with judicial branch staff, tour courtrooms, and learn about special projects.

In discussing the purpose of the summer tours, Heavican noted, "It is really important for us to get feedback from our local court staff, from judges, from community members, and from lawyers as to how certain programs are working, and what we might be able to do better for a particular community or for a larger statewide program. We use that feedback to help make the system better."