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Family Court uses horses to help families

*BY JESSICA CUFFMAN
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MARION - The equine therapy offered at a farm just south of Marion could work for almost anybody.

Unless you're severely allergic to horses or have an overwhelming fear of the 1,200-pound animals, it's an option for everyone, said Kirsten Stumpo, one of the instructors of The Equine Component, a therapy program used by Marion County Family Court to help families involved with the legal system and at-risk girls who need treatment.

People enrolled in the court-referred program work with Stumpo, who is certified by the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, and a mental health therapist.

Many of the exercises in working with the horses are based on metaphors for relationships and events in the lives of clients, Stumpo told Family Court staff who went to the farm this week to learn more about the program.

"Horses are a lot like people and are definitely a lot like kids," Stumpo said.

The 10 horses at the property, owned by Susan Goldstein, are retired standardbred horses that used to be used for racing. They're perfect for the program, Stumpo said, because they've experienced just about everything - lots of people, moving flags and other kinds of distractions. Most of the horses are at least 20 years old.

Stumpo started the program five years ago. Tessa Swavel, a mental health therapist who works with families, used to work with the 13- to 17-year-old girls who were part of the Voices program, which addresses such as healthy relationships, abuse, drug and alcohol use and others.

Swavel said it takes a lot of self-reflection before participants come up with a plan to move forward in their lives after completing the 10 equine sessions and more than a dozen outside sessions.

One component of the Voices program has been adopted by the family program. Journaling facilitates self-reflection and records experiences week-to-week, Stumpo said.

"They put their thoughts on paper and make it real," she said.

The family program works on relationship and communications issues.

Stumpo and Swavel work together to run the hour-long sessions with the horses. Swavel facilitates the mental health and safety components, and Stumpo takes care of the physical elements.

"Together, it really works well," she said.

This week, court staff participated in some sessions, getting to know four of the horses.

One black animal wandered his way through the group, stopping to be petted and putting his head over a visitor's

shoulder before heading toward some hay in the corner of the corral.

"Typically, this horse runs away," Stumpo said. "He has a lot of mistrust."

Using him in sessions creates a different dynamic, and often clients peg him as someone in their lives they have trust issues with, she said.

Family court judges Deborah Alspach and Bob Fragale came to see what the program was about.

Referrals to the therapy come from the juvenile probation department, which oversees community control for delinquents.

Susan Kieffer, the probation administrator for family court, said referrals are considered when a risk assessment is completed for offenders. The court has been working with the equine therapy program for five years and has been happy with its results, she said.

Last year, 8 to 10 girls participated. It's a safe, therapeutic setting that receives good evaluations, Kieffer said.

The only barrier to placing more clients in the program is cost, with the family rates at \$125 per therapist per session and a group rate for the Voices program. For now, those costs are covered by a grant through the Ohio Department of Youth Services.

Stumpo said she would like to start a program for boys.

"It really opens the door to just do anything," she said about equine therapy.

She described some experiences to the court staff, one about a 12-year-old boy who she didn't think was participating in the exercises, only to find out later that he was listening carefully to the horses, describing the way they moved and what they did in the pasture.

He was coming to the sessions with his mother and his father, who were separated.

By the end of the therapy course, though the boy's mother had stopped coming, his father continued to bring him and told instructors his whole outlook on parenting had been changed.

"Sometimes, just having this space here is key to developing meaningful relationships," Swavel said. Just changing the setting from a traditional office atmosphere transforms the therapy session.

"We're able to gather so much information about the person or the family," Swavel said.

The entire program is done on the ground, with no riding involved.

"What works for one doesn't necessarily work for another," Stumpo said, noting clients have to be patient to be successful in working with the horses.

When a client succeeds with a horse, the gain is self-empowerment, self-worth and self-discovery, Stumpo said.
