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MEDIA RELEASE

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EARLY INTERVENTION TO KEEP YOUTH ON TRACK

The NSW government has announced a new early intervention scheme for juveniles as young as 10, designed to prevent them becoming entrenched in criminal behaviour.

Under the model, called Youth on Track, police and schools will refer young people considered to be at risk of committing crimes, to be assessed and provided with services which address their needs.

“Police and teachers who have regular contact with a young person are often best placed to identify those at risk of becoming involved in crime. This scheme will use their expertise to identify youth at risk before it is too late,” said Attorney General and Minister for Justice Greg Smith SC.

“Targeted services will respond to the underlying causes of crime which can be changed, and help these young people deal with issues like substance abuse, educational problems, anger issues, mental illness, and family dysfunction,” he said.

“This is not about diverting young people from the legal process – it is about improving community safety by breaking the cycle of reoffending. It is about turning them away from crime and getting them back on track,” he said.

Youth on Track provides a holistic approach and was developed by the Department of Attorney General and Justice, in consultation with NSW Police Force and the Ministry for Police and Emergency Services, the departments of Education and Communities, Family and Community Services, and Health, and with non-government agencies.

“Under the scheme, young people - aged from 10 to 14, but possibly as old as 17- can be referred to Youth on Track after three police contacts,” Police Minister Michael Gallacher said.

“Police are often frustrated because they can predict which young kids fall through the gaps and turn into criminals. Youth on Track now gives police a way of helping to prevent this and thereby preventing future crime,” he said.

After the first six months Youth on Track will take referrals from schools.

“This new program complements the work that Community Services is doing to improve outcomes for at-risk teens and keep them out of the out-of-home care system – including through our significant investment in the non-government sector (\$10 million annually over four years) to provide innovative services for this group,” said Minister for Family and Community Services Pru Goward.

“I support this latest initiative and look forward to working closely with the Department of Attorney General and Justice into the future to help steer the state’s most vulnerable young people in the right direction.”

Youth on Track will first be implemented in three regions in the state, which have the largest number of young people who meet the criteria for participating in the scheme: the Mid North Coast Local Area Command, the Hunter (Newcastle LAC) and Western Sydney (Blacktown LAC).

It is estimated about 300 cases will be referred to Youth on Track in the first 12 months.

Youth on Track participants are likely to have had their first contact with police before the age of 14, and they are more likely to be male and of Aboriginal descent. They are likely to have anger, violence and mental health issues, problems with substance or alcohol use, and poor literacy and numeracy levels – issues which will be addressed by Youth on Track services.

“Given that poor school attendance is one of the key triggers for young Aboriginal people becoming involved in crime, Youth on Track is a critical step in supporting young people to stay on track by staying at school,” said Victor Dominello, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.

The Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research will evaluate the program before a decision is made about extending the program to other parts of the state.

Currently, services to reduce offending behaviour are often only available after a young person has been convicted of a criminal offence or come into detention.

This new approach, which is based on evidence of successful programs overseas, is designed to cut the offending rate of young people considered at risk of criminal behaviour.

However, young people identified by Youth on Track who are subsequently charged with criminal behaviour will still face court and be dealt with for their crimes.

Non-government organisations will be invited to tender to provide Youth on Track services in March, and the young people will be referred to them from June.

For more information: **www.youthontrack.lawlink.nsw.gov.au**.