The number of young people detained each day at the Hennepin County Juvenile Detention Center (JDC) dropped 33 percent over the past three years. The change is one of the goals sought when implementing the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) which has been piloted in Hennepin County since 2005.

The average daily population for the JDC in 2005 (pre-JDAI) was 95 youth. In 2008, the average daily population of youth in detention was 64 youth, a trend which continues in 2009. “JDAI has helped improve outcomes for young people and the community by not using unnecessary detentions for youth,” says Fourth Judicial District Court Judge Tanya Bransford, co-chair of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. “We want to hold young people accountable for their behavior. But JDAI is demonstrating how to do that in a more cost efficient and effective way.”

Prior to JDAI, research showed that youth were being detained for infractions that did not pose a public-safety risk. As part of the initiative, juvenile detention staff now uses a new risk assessment tool to help evaluate whether a young person should be held in secure detention or is eligible for a community-based alternative.

Research also showed that before JDAI, approximately one-third of the warrants for the arrest of juveniles was due to failure to appear in court. Now, the new Court Calling Reminder Program uses volunteers to make reminder calls to youth and their parents about court dates, reducing the number of no-shows by nearly 20 percent. “This helps Juvenile Court operate more efficiently,” said Bransford, who spent six years as a Juvenile Court judge, including two and a half years as presiding judge. “In addition, we anticipate this effort will help reduce the cost of serving bench warrants in these cases.” The decrease in annual admissions to the Juvenile Detention Center is also expected to produce cost savings which JDAI is seeking to have redirected to expanding and sustaining community-based alternatives.

Meanwhile, juvenile crime in 2008 dropped 17 percent over 2007 and 29 percent over 2006. According to Bransford, Hennepin County has targeted juvenile crime with a highly collaborative effort involving many organizations including the Courts, the County Attorney’s office, Minneapolis police, the city, and schools. “JDAI is helping us avoid the negative behaviors that can develop from having a juvenile who has committed a low-level offense, like curfew violation, placed in secure detention with youth far more deeply involved in the system.”

Another goal of the JDAI is to eliminate the disproportionate representation of juveniles of color in secure detention. From 2005-2008 the number of African American youth detained daily at the Juvenile Detention Center dropped 33 percent. However, last year youth of color still accounted for more than 90 percent of the daily population in the JDC, a challenge JDAI continues to work on.

JDAI is being piloted in four Minnesota counties—Hennepin, Ramsey, Dakota and St. Louis with support from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety and the national Annie E. Casey Foundation.