Prosecutors, judges and law enforcement listen to county commissioners discuss how to handle children that have been placed in Juvenile Corrections and Prevention Services. Daily Leader photo/Jessica Crawford

By JESSICA CRAWFORD • Daily Leader County commissioners discovered during a work session Thursday evening that deciding the placement of JCAPS is a case of putting the cart before the horse. It was apparent to the commission, with the help of local attorneys and judges, the first order of business for JCAPS is hiring a director.

Although the current JCAPS location may be “substandard” as described by District Attorney Don Scott, the program itself must operate as intended – and it currently isn’t.

“The intention of this program is to fix kids, not lock them up,” Scott said. “The purpose is to fix them.”

Unfortunately, attorney Russell Hasenbank said, the program is currently deficient in programs to assist the youth under JCAPS supervision.

“Assessments were done to see what their needs were,” Hasenbank said. “From there, we would take that assessment and start providing services for those kids. The community and commission and everybody involved – nobody has ever done that part. We are still failing on that part. We have failed since 1994.”

The lack of an acting director, someone to get the ball rolling, Hasenbank said, is the reason kids are staying in the system and not getting the help they need.

“The kids aren’t getting anything meaningful and they wallow around in the system with other kids that aren’t getting anything,” he said. “So nobody is getting help, they are all hanging out together. The next thing you know, they do something new with a new friend they got in trouble with because we are not moving forward.”

Commissioner C.J. Wettstein asked why JCAPS wasn't moving children forward in the system.

"There are no services," Hasenbank said. "We don't have enough mental health providers, we don't enough people getting in the homes working with their mothers and fathers."

Don Scott gave an analogy to the commission to further illustrate the problem with the JCAPS program.

"It is kind of like you take your car into the shop and they say your spark plugs are bad," he said. "But they don't have spark plugs. You have to have spark plugs to fix what is wrong."

Mike Howell, director of Cimarron Basin Community Corrections, has been also serving as interim director for JCAPS. All agreed Howell was spread entirely too thin to effectively get JCAPS running as it should be.

"You need a full-time director that can come to you and say, 'these are the programs we need, we want to set them up and this is what they are going to cost,'" Scott said. "We need somebody to monitor those employees to stay on them and make sure it happens. That is a full-time job."

Ivanhoe Love Jr. of Adolescent Support Services agreed a director was needed, he also feels a new facility would be best for the JCAPS clients as well. However, he said, money would have to be spent.

Placing JCAPS in the courthouse with Cimarron Basin Community Corrections, Love said, would be a mistake.

"Make no mistake about it, if you mix kids with adults, there is some influence that is going to occur even if it is just happenstance walking through the hallway," he said. "The chance meetings are just as bad as almost sitting and having a conversation. These kids look to idols.

"The chance of happenstance meetings are going to occur," he added. "And I say that is a danger and influence on those kids – if we are in the business of fixing kids."

Love suggested the commission "bite the bullet" and invest in the future by providing services to the youth before they end up in adult services.

"When you go cheap, you wind up with less quality and lose the impact of the program," he said. "In your decision making process, the cheapest is not the best we need for these kids. You should be thinking Cadillac for kids, because you are going to pay on the other end if you don't."

The commission agreed to see to it the JCAPS advisory board looks over 16 director applicants as well as oversee the interview process.

Although a new facility may be in the foreseeable future, the commission ultimately decided finding a good director for JCAPS was the first order of business.

“You are not hiring someone to keep the wheels greased and keep it moving,” Scott informed the commission. “You are hiring someone to create – because it doesn’t exist.”