**GUIDELINES FOR REQUESTING PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATIONS**

**IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM
(Courtesy of ST JOSEPH PROBATE COURT)**

Psychological evaluations may be helpful to the Court/probation department for many different reasons. They are typically most helpful when used to answer a specific referral question. A sample of common referral questions and some discussion of each is provided below. Other relevant and appropriate referral questions may arise. In general, the more specific the question, the more helpful the evaluation is likely to be.

**What is the youth’s mental health diagnosis, if any, and what is the best course of treatment for that diagnosis?**

A diagnostic evaluation is not necessarily needed for all youth who have been involved in the mental health system, even if his/her mental health problems have been serious or severe. The evaluation is most needed if it appears that the mental health providers involved cannot agree on the diagnosis or best course of treatment and/or the recent treatment has been ineffective. Sometimes, the Court or the probation department may simply want the existing mental health information summarized, synthesized and/or updated, and this can also be a valid reason for a diagnostic evaluation.

**To what extent do this youth’s mental health problems appear to be connected to his or her delinquent behavior?**

This question, whether considered in terms of the insanity defense or as a mitigating factor, although rarely posed in juvenile court, is still frequently factored into the recommendation(s) for disposition. This question may be addressed in an evaluation in isolation or combined with the first question.

**What is the risk for delinquency/violence/sexual recidivism, and how can that risk best be managed and reduced?**

This question can sometimes be answered by the probation officer and the IYAS or another risk tool completed by the probation officer. If not, or if another opinion is desired, then a specific risk assessment may be helpful.

**What are the family dynamics or other family problems that may be contributing to this youth’s current problems (including delinquency), and how can those problems be best addressed?**

Parenting and various family dynamics contribute to the problems experienced by many/most youth involved in the juvenile justice system, and an assessment that identifies those issues or deficits and spells out a plan for addressing them may help to reduce future delinquency. A family evaluation typically involves assessing both the youth and his/her parent(s) or caregiver(s).

**What are this parent’s mental health/substance abuse problems/diagnoses, if any? What are his/her parenting skills/deficits? How do these issues relate to the youth’s delinquency history and risk for future delinquency?**

This is similar to a family evaluation, but focuses only on a specific parent.

**Is this youth competent to understand the charges against him/her and assist in his/her own defense?**

Competency evaluations address issues of intellectual functioning and other developmental competencies that may affect the youth’s ability to receive fair treatment by the Court.