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A question of curfew

Police hold and offer services to kids who are swept up for being out too late, but some parents say the efforts are overzealous

By Julie Bykowicz

Sun Reporter

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It's about 3:20 a.m. when a mother in a smiley-face do-rag, sweats and pink bedroom slippers steps into the bright lights of the elementary school gymnasium, anything but happy as she scans a semicircle of kids in folding chairs for her teenage daughter. Close behind is a woman in all black, clutching a pack of Newport cigarettes. She shakes her head in disgust when her 16-year-old boy spots her and smiles broadly.

These sleepy mothers have come to retrieve their children from Baltimore's new curfew center at Dallas F. Nicholas Sr. Elementary School in Barclay, open from midnight to 4 a.m. each Friday, Saturday and Sunday until school resumes this fall.



Overnight yesterday, 64 boys and girls - a mix of older teens with records of assault and drug possession, and little kids who'd been playing baseball behind their apartment building - were swept up by patrol officers throughout the city and deposited at the curfew center to wait for their parents.

City curfew for kids under 17 - midnight Saturday and Sunday morning and 11 p.m. other nights of the week - has been on the books since 1978. But this is the first time that curfew enforcement has moved beyond being what Police Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld III recently described as "a de facto cab service."

Now, the city corrals the young violators in a building full of workers who want to do more. The youths are photographed and interviewed and checked in a computer database of open warrants or probation records. They're fed a boxed lunch. Then comes the call to their parents, who arrive sometimes hours later, almost always disgruntled, with identification in hand. The parents are given a primer on curfew law and the penalties they face if their children get picked up again: up to \$300 and 60 days in jail.

The past two summers, the city had a similar but less inclusive curfew center at Dunbar High School. That curfew center processed 2,300 violators last year, city officials said, but it didn't offer any services or check their backgrounds. This summer and next, a \$120,000 federal grant will pay for the curfew center.

Juvenile curfews have always been controversial. Police say it helps them keep crime down, but civil libertarians say it takes away a parent's discretion. In an urban setting like Baltimore, there's an extra complication: Families without air conditioning often use the outdoors as an extension of their living space. Some parents at the curfew center overnight yesterday complained that it was unfair to pick up youngsters who might be sitting outside on a hot summer night, even in the wee hours.

Police officers countered that the curfew is "basically for the safety of your kids."

"Bullets can be flying this late at night," said Officer Latanya Lewis, who arrived at 1:40 a.m. with a van of 11 boys and girls from the Northeast District.

Now in its third weekend of operation, the curfew center has also turned into a sort of community outreach project. Rarely do parents have this sort of access to police officers, city Health Department and state Department of Juvenile Services workers, and other city employees in a single room. Sheryl Goldstein, director of the Mayor's Office on Criminal Justice, said she'd love to see representatives of youth programs at the site, too. But, she acknowledges, the hours aren't so great.

Early yesterday morning, one frustrated mother pulled aside a city Health Department worker. The woman's 14-year-old daughter, wearing a Hershey's chocolate bar T-shirt and glasses, stood with her arms crossed as her mother vented.

The Sun does not identify juveniles accused of a crime without their parents' consent.

"When she doesn't want to abide by my rules, she just doesn't come home," the woman told Leyla Layman, a health analyst who works with kids. "I don't know what to do. It just seems like if you're not a drug addict and if you're not beating the hell out of your kids, there's no help for you."

Layman explained that the woman could file an ungovernable child petition in Juvenile Court, which would give the family access to that agency's programs, such as self-esteem-building workshops, vocational training and help with school.

It wasn't too long after midnight when Officer John Fabula arrived from the Western District with a van of 11 boys and girls. By then, a collection of bewildered parents had gathered outside the school's 21st Street entrance. Some had gotten cell phone calls from kids who'd been detained. Others had heard from neighbors that a police van had come through, so they stopped first at the Baltimore City Juvenile Justice Center on Gay Street and were redirected to Dallas Nicholas.

"I really consider this kidnapping," said Chiffon Rogers, who had gone there in search of her 11-year-old grandson, De-Andre McLean. "It's like a dog pound coming through, scooping up children like that. They're treating him like a criminal when all he was doing was walking to a friend's house to stay the night."

The kids from Fabula's police van filed into the curfew center one by one, passing through a metal detector. Some of the girls wore tiny summer outfits and chatted on cell phones. Some boys arrived shirtless.

Half a dozen school police officers processed the youths, asking them for their names, phone numbers and addresses. The officers snapped photographs of the kids and directed them to a ring of blue metal folding chairs, where they waited while workers researched their history and contacted their parents. Some snacked on sandwiches and sipped juice donated by Aramark Food Services, which has promised

to deliver food to the school each weekend to feed the curfew violators.

Malik Lomax, 10, and his friend Marcell Rush, 8, sat quietly as their mothers looked on from across the room. The boys had been playing catch outside Gilmore Homes on Mount Street when Fabula's van pulled up about 11:30 p.m. Rhona Lomax, Malik's mother, said she had been outside with them but briefly stepped inside to put an 11-month-old to bed.

Malik said he was scared when a female officer approached them.

"She just came up to me and grabbed me like I was her own child," he said. "I thought I was going to jail."

Neither of the boys had been in trouble before, their mothers said, and they were worried about how the experience would affect them.

"My child's not a bad kid," Lomax said. "He was probably scared to death."

Neither Lomax nor Marcell's mother, Aurinthia Lassiter, thought the curfew center was a bad idea in and of itself. But both said they wished officers would be more discerning in which children they detained.

Just outside the school a mother and father - the father wearing a hairnet and factory uniform - were waiting for their teenager to arrive. "I think this is a great idea," said the mother, who did not want to give her name or her son's. "I tell him a time to come in, and if he's not in, I come looking for him. Maybe this will help."

As the early morning hours ticked on, parents took longer and longer to arrive. As it neared 4 a.m., about two dozen kids remained, barely awake, in their folding chairs. A small television was set to the Hallmark Channel without sound, but nobody paid attention to it.

Some of the last few boys there were on probation and under the supervision of the Department of Juvenile Services. In all, 11 of the 64 kids yesterday had active criminal or probation cases. DJS processor Ginger Myers sat at a laptop, plugging in names and calling over kids.

Goldstein said that on earlier nights, a majority of the youths were on probation for juvenile offenses, including one who was a registered sex offender and one who was a convicted armed robber.

Tammy Brown, a DJS spokeswoman, said the caseworkers follow up with the curfew violators and sometimes increase their supervision levels. If a youth has been identified by the department's violence prevention initiative as a particular risk, he or she can be taken directly to the Juvenile Justice Center for an immediate meeting with a caseworker and a parent.

"It gives us the opportunity to have meaningful contact with them," Brown said of the curfew center. "We're reaching them immediately and finding out why they are on the streets at night."

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