



## **Chatham embraces new Youth Development Center**

by William Lassiter

A vision of creating a more therapeutic juvenile justice system in North Carolina became closer to becoming reality last month in Chatham County with the opening of the new Chatham County Youth Development Center. This 32-bed facility is located in Siler City in the Central Carolina Business Campus near the new Chatham County Hospital. The center serves female youth committed to the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. It is the first of four replacement youth development centers to open across the State in 2008.

The building of these replacement facilities was prompted by an audit conducted in 2003 that showed the State's youth development centers were outdated, unsafe, and lacking security. These facilities will be the foundation of a more therapeutic approach to providing services to our youth and their families, with the intent of a community-oriented juvenile justice system. By building smaller, community-based facilities throughout the State, the Department will be able to more effectively assist youth with the skills they need to become productive citizens in North Carolina's communities.

A youth development center serves youth, who are 10 years or older, and who are committed to the State. A commitment to a youth development center is for a minimum of six months; however, the average length of stay last year was 386 days. Since the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 1998, commitment to a youth development center is reserved for serious and/or violent offenders in addition to chronic offenders. The replacement Chatham County Youth Development Center is housing 32 females in four

different eight-bed housing units. A blended education-treatment Model of Care serves as the programming the youth receive.

One purpose of the Model of Care is to introduce youth who often come from broken homes to positive adult relationships. The Department will call upon community members to volunteer with the young ladies served by this facility. The Department has seen that youth who have a strong community support structure are much more likely to be successful. If community members are interested in volunteering, they may contact the Department.

A dedication ceremony was held for the new Chatham County Youth Development Center on April 18, 2008 where approximately 100 community members, lawmakers, government officials, juvenile justice representatives, and school officials were all on hand to celebrate a new day for juvenile justice in North Carolina.

The keynote speaker at the dedication was the Secretary of the Department, George L. Sweat who stated, "We know bricks and mortar alone do not change a youth's life. It will take dedicated, caring, and competent staff building relationships with the youth served by this facility to do that. We need to ensure that we have the proper staffing in this facility if we are going to change lives." Sweat thanked lawmakers present including Speaker of the House Joe Hackney for their commitment to helping make the Chatham County Youth Development Center a reality.

The Chatham County Youth Development Center was built with State appropriated funds at a cost of approximately \$6 million and the State will support the operations of the facility with an annual budget of slightly over \$3 million. The facility has brought 66 new jobs to the county.

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