



A Times Editorial

## Editorial: Hillsborough should expand civil citation program for youths

Friday, September 23, 2016 4:35pm



My  
Edition

Juveniles should not be shut out of college or the job market because of a childish mistake, which is why Florida's juvenile civil citation program is so vital in giving small-time offenders a second chance and in avoiding the prison pipeline. Hillsborough County, which has not used this program as effectively as others in Florida, should look to divert more juveniles away from the criminal justice system and toward more productive lives.

### RELATED NEWS/ARCHIVE

**Editorial: Civil citations for pot possession**  
6 Months Ago

**Editorial: St. Petersburg should embrace diversion program**  
1 Month Ago

**Column: Create civil citations to address minor crimes**  
5 Months Ago

Civil citations are a means for counties to deal with common youth crimes without having to subject a juvenile to the cost and hassle of an arrest or the stigma of a criminal record. Rather than send a juvenile through the court system for vandalizing property, trespassing or other petty crimes, authorities issue a civil citation, which requires offenders to take responsibility for their actions, perform community service and undertake counseling. Juveniles are spared an arrest record, and citations are cheaper for local communities than arresting and housing a juvenile in jail. While the counties differ in how they administer the program, and in what

crimes are covered, civil citations generally are offered for non-violent misdemeanors.

Statistics from the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice show that Hillsborough trails other counties in its use of civil citations. While comparing the "utilization rate" can be tricky, given that these programs vary widely between the counties, Hillsborough has generally taken a conservative approach. It offers juvenile citations for 11 offenses, including petty theft, criminal mischief and other nonviolent crimes. And it limits eligibility to first-time offenders. In August, Hillsborough added small-time marijuana possession to the list. But other large urban counties, such as Pinellas, consider a broader range of crimes and open the program to second- and third-time offenders in some instances.

Pinellas succeeds by looking at the totality of circumstances in each individual case. Some crimes are too serious for civil citations, and repeat offenders need to show a pattern that their crimes are isolated cases in an otherwise lawful life. This is the sort of disciplined judgment call that other jurisdictions could employ to bring more juveniles into the program.

The inter-agency group that coordinates the Hillsborough program, which includes the state attorney, public defender and law enforcement groups, is exploring whether to apply the citations to a broader range of crimes. Authorities also want to expand the intake capacity of the juvenile center, to create more space to hold juveniles while their parents are being contacted to collect them. These are good ways to spare more young people from the damage that can come with an arrest record.

The program is a commonsense alternative for many youth that can become a valuable life experience, save taxpayers tens of millions across the state and reduce the prison pipeline over the long-term. And it works; in Hillsborough, nearly 80 percent of the 2,820 kids referred to civil citations in the last five years successfully completed the program, the state attorney's office reports. Hillsborough should look for ways to expand a program that can lead to better outcomes for young people and cost savings that could be better redirected to public safety.