TEEN COURT OVERVIEW - October 2010

Teen Court was instituted in Montgomery County in March 1997. First Teen Court in the State of Maryland. More than 3000 cases have been handled to date.

Teen Court is a program that offers teenage offenders (who are referred to as "respondents") an important second chance - - a chance to learn from their mistakes without the high cost of a criminal record. One of the goals of Teen Court is to encourage a respondent to take responsibility for his/her actions, to make them aware that there are consequences to those actions, and to expose them to a realistic experience in an actual court of law.

Teen Court is a real justice program run by teens for teens, and is offered as a positive experience to divert a first time teen offender away from a pattern of criminal behavior. Juveniles aged 12 through 17 who have committed a misdemeanor crime appear before a jury of their peers. The crime is generally a first offense, and the respondent must admit involvement (guilt) since this is a disposition (sentencing) hearing only. Cases heard in Teen Court involve crimes such as shoplifting, vandalism, taking a weapon to school, reckless endangerment, possession of alcohol, possession of marijuana, to name a few.

In Teen court, volunteer teens perform the roles of bailiff, clerk and jury. The "Peer Jury System"is used. An adult judge presides.

After careful consideration of the facts, the teen jury deliberates and decides upon a constructive disposition, which must include such mandatory things as community service, possible service on future teen juries, and, in some instances, the adult led JETS or YES programs. In addition, such optional dispositions as other adult led educational programs (SETS or CHOICES), essays or apology letters might be imposed. Restorative justice principles are followed - - what is best for the respondent, the victim and the community at large. The respondent then has the chance to complete the disposition and have the original charge dismissed. If the disposition is not completed in 60 days, the case is returned to the referring agency.

Call Georgine DeBord at (240) 777-7344 for more information

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Teen Court:

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Attorneys in the Juvenile Division of the Montgomery County Office of the State's Attorney began efforts to establish the Montgomery County Teen Court (MCTC) in 1996. The State's Attorney's Office embraced the idea of a Teen Court to fill two major gaps in the Juvenile Justice System. First, it provided a diversionary program for first time offenders in a serious setting. Second, through the volunteers in the program, its founders hoped to educate the non-offending youth in the county in the Criminal Justice System and to encourage them to take ownership of the problems of teen crime.

The State's Attorney's Office formed an inter-agency coalition, including the Judiciary, the police, the school system, the Department of Juvenile Justice, the defense bar, and a county student advisory board. This coalition worked together to form the guidelines and policies for the new program. The first Teen Court session was held in March of 1997.

Attorneys from the State's Attorney's Office and from the general community volunteer to teach teens from grades 9 through 12 from Montgomery County schools about the laws and the judicial system. Hundreds of youth have been trained and participate as youth attorneys, jurors, clerks and bailiffs. They learn about the judicial system and improve leadership roles. They receive student service hours for attending.

The respondent and the volunteers appear in a Circuit courtroom in front of a real judge. The judges, including Circuit, District, and Special Appeals judges volunteer their time. The volunteer judges are present to answer legal questions and set the tone for the courtroom, but it is the teens that decide sanctions after listening to mitigating and aggravating factors. Community service hours and jury duty are mandatory sanctions.

The jury duty, in which the respondents return on another teen court evening and sit on the jury themselves, gives them an interesting perspective that is very useful. The community service is also very effective. Teen Court respondents have completed over 85,000 hours of community service. They participated at various community locations including shelters, nursing homes, schools, etc. In addition to the community service and the jury duty, the teens are often asked to write apology letters or essays. They are often referred to educational classes, as well as Shoplifting Prevention Programs.

Most of the referrals come directly from the police department. The teens, generally first time offenders, are offered an opportunity to complete their sanctions within 60 days from their Teen Court hearing. When they complete, a notice is sent to the police department informing them and recommending that charges be dropped. The youth will not have a permanent record if they attend Teen Court.

Teen Court is a nationwide program. There is a National Youth Court Association as well as a Maryland Teen Court Association, both of which provide informational and instructional services to Youth Courts. There are approximately 1100 teen courts throughout the nation. Montgomery County was the first teen court established in Maryland and now teen courts exists in 12 other Maryland communities.

The guiding idea behind all teen courts is the same-if peer pressure can lead young people into delinquency; hopefully it can keep them out of delinquency. The results of the Evaluation of Teen Courts Project suggest that there may be something to this supposition. Parents of respondents are very pleased with teen court results.