



"As a member of the police force at the time that our youth court was started, I was in charge of juvenile cases, and I saw that kids charged in low-level crimes weren't being taken care of in the courts. The Court wasn't able to focus on the low-level offenses because they had more serious cases that needed attention. Youth court has changed that."

*- Chief Steven Heider,
Colonie, NY Youth Court*

Interested in Youth Courts? What *Law Enforcement Officers* Need to Know

A youth court is a program in which youth volunteers sentence their peers under restorative justice principles for juvenile offenses, traffic infractions, truancy, or school rule violations. There are over 25 youth courts operating throughout Washington State and many more are being planned. Could your community benefit from a youth court program? Here are a few things to consider as you think about starting a youth court program.

Benefits to Law Enforcement Officers

Law enforcement officers often see that the legal system does not successfully intervene when young people commit minor misdemeanors and other violations. Youth may have to graduate to more serious offenses before the juvenile system will step in, and many times young people are not changed by their experience with the legal system. Youth court programs add peer pressure to influence youthful offenders as a new tool in the response to juvenile offenses. In addition, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy has determined that youth court programs reduce crime and save taxpayers and victims over \$9,000 per case.

State law authorizes and encourages youth courts

State law authorizes and regulates youth court programs in Washington State. The law requires youth courts to use restorative justice principles and to follow national youth court guidelines. It specifically encourages courts to work with cities, counties and community organizations and youth to implement, expand and use youth court programs. The list below highlights the responsibilities of the juvenile justice system in juvenile diversion youth court programs as outlined by the Washington state youth court legislation.

- Juvenile court must grant prior approval to and supervise youth courts.
- Youth courts have jurisdiction over 8-17 year old, diversion-eligible youth where the prosecutor or probation counselor determines probable cause to believe the youth committed a crime.
- Youth courts do not have jurisdiction over youth who are under the continuing jurisdiction of the juvenile court for law violations, including youth with a matter pending before juvenile court which has not been adjudicated.
- Youth courts have specific disposition options that are in addition to traditional diversion options.
- Youth court programs are responsible for notifying the prosecutor or probation counselor of unsuccessful completion of disposition.

Roles for Law Enforcement Officers

Law enforcement officers are the first contact that offenders have with the legal system. They know firsthand the issues facing troubled youth, and are well connected to the schools, courts and other agencies essential to establishing a youth court program. Law enforcement officers also know about the community resources that are available as disposition options and may provide access to these resources for the youth court respondents. The role of a law enforcement officer in a youth court program can vary depending on the type of program and how it is structured.

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Want to create a youth court but don't know where to start?

Help is here! Start with contacting the **Washington State Council on Public Legal Education** for information and technical assistance.

Visit the **Federal Youth Court Program**, www.youthcourt.net, which has helpful publications, training materials and resources to assist emerging youth court programs, including these **important publications**.

- *Youth Cases for Youth Courts Desktop Guide*
- *Peer Justice and Youth Empowerment: An Implementation Guide for Teen Court Programs*
- *National Youth Court Guidelines*

Law enforcement officers can

- identify the needs of the community for effective responses to particular offenses,
- operate youth court program through the law enforcement office,
- provide leadership for youth court programs by serving as advisory board members,
- identify and provide access disposition options, such as educational classes, community service placement, and drug and alcohol assessments, and
- advocate for the creation of a youth court program to meet the needs of the youth they serve.

Steps to take

Here are some steps you can take right now to begin the creation of a youth court in your community.

- Participate in an exploratory group to identify youth problems in your community and where there is a need for effective programs.
- Contact the Washington State Council for Public Legal Education (cple@wsba.org) for information and technical assistance in starting and operating a youth court.
- Consult the Federal Youth Court Program at www.youthcourt.net.
- Contact other communities in Washington that have a youth court program in place.
- Participate in an advisory group to set up a program.

For more information on youth court programs and training opportunities in Washington State, contact

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