



*“Youth Courts provide an excellent option for prosecutors and a real opportunity for prevention of future delinquency.*

*A youth court program provides teens in trouble with the law or their school the opportunity to become part of the community again through a positive, supportive, restorative process.”*

*- Rick Peters, Senior Deputy Prosecutor and Youth Court Supervisor  
Thurston County WA*

## Interested in Youth Courts? What *Prosecutors* 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 Prosecutors**

Juvenile prosecutors manage large caseloads month after month. Consequently, prosecutors are not able to address many youth committing minor first-time offenses. But these first-time offenses are often the warning signs of future incidences of juvenile delinquency. Unfortunately, there may be few options for prosecutors until the offender commits more serious offenses. As a diversion program, youth courts provide an excellent way to intervene and act more quickly than the traditional juvenile process. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy has determined that youth court reduces crime and saves 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 and counties 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 courts must grant prior approval to and supervise youth courts.
- Youth courts have jurisdiction over 8 to 17-year-old, diversion-eligible youth where the prosecutor or probation counselor determines there is 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 when respondents fail to complete their disposition requirements.

Typical cases for youth court include misdemeanor theft, malicious mischief, minors in possession, tobacco offenses, criminal trespass, harassment, loitering, possession of stolen property, and other offenses.

(over)



**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](http://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*

## **Roles for Prosecutors**

Prosecutors have a unique vantage point on the juvenile justice 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. The role of prosecutor in a youth court program can vary depending on the type of program and how it is structured.

### **Prosecutors can**

- refer youth to youth court programs,
- provide leadership for youth court programs by serving as advisory board members,
- identify and provide access to 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](mailto: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](http://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**

### **The Council on Public Legal Education**

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