



OJJDP Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Shay Bilchik, Administrator

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A Guide for Implementing Teen Court Programs

by Tracy M. Godwin

The use of alcohol and drugs, drinking and driving, and other risk-taking behaviors are serious issues that face today's young people. Every year, the age at which children must confront negative peer pressure and make crucial decisions gets younger, and the consequences of bad decisions can be significant for them, their victims, and the community. Adolescence is a pivotal stage of human development. Sound guidance and meaningful learning opportunities during this time will help youth become responsible and productive citizens. Therefore, adolescents should be a primary focus of prevention and intervention efforts at Federal, State, and local levels.

The Role of Teen Courts in the Justice System

Teen courts, also called peer and youth courts, represent an alternative approach to the traditional juvenile justice system. Most teen courts require defendants to plead guilty prior to participation in the program; however, a small number of these courts are structured to determine guilt or innocence. In a teen court, juvenile offenders are held accountable for substance use and other misdemeanor offenses and sentenced by a jury of their peers to community service, counseling, restitution, and/or an apology to the victim.

Teen courts are seen as an effective intervention in many jurisdictions where enforcement of misdemeanor charges is sometimes given low priority because of heavy caseloads and the need to focus on more serious offenders. Teen courts also present communities with opportunities to teach young people valuable life and coping skills and promote positive peer influence for youth who are defendants and for volunteer youth who play a variety of roles in the teen court process. These volunteers serve not only as jurors but also as defense or prosecuting attorneys, court clerks, bailiffs, and even—in some cases—judges. Teen courts mobilize a diverse mix of volunteer youth and adults for active and constructive involvement in addressing problems in their towns and cities.

In the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) *Guide for Implementing the Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders*, teen court is included as a graduated sanction with multiple purposes that jurisdictions can use when youth are charged with misdemeanor offenses. The teen court approach sends a strong message to the community at large—including other youth—that young people do not condone law-breaking behaviors.

As of October 1995, approximately 190 teen court programs were operating in 25 States. Nationwide, teen courts share many of the same fundamental principles; however, the manner in which they function in their day-to-day operations can vary significantly from program to program. Developing and implementing teen courts on a local level requires a coordinated and collaborative effort among various sectors of the community, including the justice system, schools, and families. Teen court programs are currently operated by juvenile courts, juvenile probation departments, law enforcement agencies, private nonprofit organizations, and schools.

Development of the Guide

For teen courts to reach their maximum effectiveness, juvenile justice agencies need guidance in developing programs that are philosophically sound and legally defensible. To provide program organizers with baseline information on developing, implementing, and enhancing teen court programs within their jurisdictions, the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) has developed *Peer Justice and Youth Empowerment: An Implementation Guide for Teen Court Programs*, a joint publication of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) of the U.S. Department of Transportation and OJJDP of the U.S. Department of Justice. Development of the *Guide* was part of APPA's Teen Courts Project, which also involves delivery of training and technical assistance on teen court programs.

APPA found several different program models for teen courts, but the *Guide* does not endorse one particular model. Instead, the

publication provides program organizers with a general overview of issues to consider and guides them through the decisionmaking process for implementing a teen court program tailored to local needs. Content areas of the *Guide* include the following:

- ◆ Overview of the teen court concept.
- ◆ Descriptions of two teen court models: trial models and peer jury models.
- ◆ Stakeholder partnerships.
- ◆ Legal issues.
- ◆ Program purpose, goals, and objectives.
- ◆ Offender population and referral process.
- ◆ Sentencing options and victim services.
- ◆ Effective case management practices.
- ◆ Recruitment, use, and training of volunteers.
- ◆ Financial resources.
- ◆ Program evaluation—e.g., performance-based measures.

A checklist at the end of each chapter summarizes the material covered. Other supplementary materials include sample forms, program brochures, and courtroom protocol; an implementation chart; and a directory of teen court programs across the country.

The purpose of the *Guide* is to encourage more jurisdictions to develop and implement teen courts as an effective vehicle to help youth realize that they are accountable for their actions; to educate them on the impact of their actions, either positive or

negative, on others in the community; and to offer a hands-on juvenile justice system experience for both youthful offenders and youth volunteers who participate in the program. In doing so, communities can join in the national commitment to respond proactively to problems associated with adolescent substance use and other misdemeanor offenses.

For Further Information

For a free copy of *Peer Justice and Youth Empowerment: An Implementation Guide for Teen Court Programs*, please call OJJDP's Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (JJC) at 800-638-8736. The *Guide for Implementing the Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders* is also available from JJC.

Additional information on APPA training and technical assistance related to teen courts is available from Tracy Godwin by fax (606-244-8001) or by mail (Teen Courts Project Manager, APPA, c/o The Council of State Governments, P.O. Box 11910, Lexington, KY 40578-1910).

Tracy M. Godwin is the Project Manager for APPA's Teen Courts Project, sponsored by NHTSA.

APPA is an international association of individuals actively involved with probation, parole, and community-based corrections in both the adult and juvenile sectors. The association provides training workshops, symposiums, and training institutes and produces a variety of research documents as resources for its membership.

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