



**Bringing Justice to the Youth Justice System
Alternatives That Work
Dane County (Wisconsin) Timebank Youth Court
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Through the Racial Justice Initiative, there is now a moral, economic and legal force underway to compel judges and other officials to choose from an array of proven practices that help (not harm) America's youth. Using a new legal doctrine, the Racial Justice Initiative will begin putting judges and their communities on formal notice of the injuries resulting from juvenile confinement practices and of the availability of much more effective and affordable alternatives. In Wisconsin, Dane County's Timebank Youth Court is an example of one of these proven alternatives to detention and confinement.

HOW IT WORKS

Dane County teens who have been charged with ordinance violations such as habitual truancy, some drug possession, petty theft, vandalism, disorderly conduct, trespassing or fighting are offered the option of accepting a traditional ticket issued by law enforcement, or admit guilt and attend Youth Court. The novel approach is the brain child of local law enforcement seeking more effective ways to help youth get back on track and protect the public. The arresting police officer offers the route to Youth Court based on the type of offense.

According to *A National Update: Communities Embracing Youth Courts for At-Risk Youth*, youth court is a rapidly expanding alternative to the juvenile justice system for young people who have committed non-violent offenses. Youth volunteers, under the supervision of adult volunteers, work as bailiffs, clerks, jury and judges, questioning the offender, debating and imposing sentences. The program's goal is to intervene in early antisocial, delinquent, and criminal behaviors to reduce incidents and prevent the escalation of such behaviors.

When a youth offender goes to the Youth Court, he or she appears before a jury of peers. Under adult supervision and earning Time Dollars (hours of service given and collected from members in a social service network), youth jurors determine and deliver a sentence to the youth offender. A sentence can involve: attending life skills classes on anger management, healthy relationships, employment skills and money management, alcohol and other drug abuse prevention, and others; community service; writing an apology letter serving on the jury; and more. The youth offender has 90 days to complete the sentence. After the 90 days is up and the sentence is completed, the ticket or charge is destroyed and the violation does not appear on the respondent's record. If the respondent fails to complete the sentence in 90 days, the ticket or charge is issued.

RESULTS

Youth Court programs across the nation experience immediate returns on investment. Even in programs with only two years of operation, more than 80% of the youth offenders have completed their sentences successfully. In 30% of the participating programs, 1 in 5 youth offenders returns to the program as a volunteer. The average costs of youth court programs are estimated as \$430 per youth served and \$480 per youth successfully completing a sentence. These low operation costs for youth courts are maintained through the programs' reliance on adult and youth volunteers.

In short, the Dane County Timebank Youth Court and other alternative approaches to juvenile justice are more effective than incarceration. *And* they are less expensive. *And* they enhance public safety by turning youth away from the lifestyles and the incarceration that lead to more crime.

WHY IT MATTERS

With all these advantages known, officials who still choose traditional detention and confinement for minority youth can only be practicing "deliberate indifference" or "intentional disregard," which will constitute intent to discriminate under a new legal doctrine being deployed by the Racial Justice Initiative. Using a series of public hearings across the nation, officials will be given two choices: change their practices voluntarily or change them as a result of successful litigation against them.

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