



**Bringing Justice to the Youth Justice System
Police Support for Alternatives That Work
06.24.09**

Through the TimeBanks USA 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 TimeBanks USA 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. These alternative programs, such as youth court and youth advocate programs, are so effective in a practical sense—on the street where it counts—that law enforcement personnel have become among the strongest supporters. Houston and D.C. are just two examples of places where law enforcement personnel support alternatives to confinement and detention.

HOW IT WORKS

For more than two years, D.C. police officer Lisa Belson has been volunteering each Saturday at the Time Dollar Youth Court (TDYC), which was authorized in 1996 by the D.C. Superior Court. TDYC transforms a youth's early encounters with the law into a turning point in that youth's life, leading to enhanced self-esteem, contributions to the community and positive opportunities to become a better person. Youth in this program face a jury of their peers and have opportunities for community service and life skills training. TDYC has grown into the largest youth court in the country, handling the broadest range of offenses. In fact, this program has become the cornerstone of D.C.'s emerging community-based juvenile justice system.

Not only is Officer Belson recruiting other police officers to join her in volunteering at TDYC, she also brought in her son to volunteer as a TDYC juror. His continuing involvement has led him to becoming a Youth Advocate Judge who helps train jurors.

In D.C.'s Ward 1, police have a partnership with TDYC, have set up a Ward 1 youth court, and have given youth court an award. And in D.C.'s Chinatown, police have requested that youth arrested there be sent to the police for community service assignments in Chinatown.

Houston's Youth Advocate Program has been cited by the Department of Justice as an exemplary alternative to detention. In this program, youth work with police to clean up the yards of elderly and disabled individuals who, unable to do this work themselves, face the possibility of losing their homes if the city were to send out clean-up crews and then levy tax liens to cover costs.

RESULTS

Police believe in these alternative approaches to incarceration and traditional juvenile justice because the alternatives are more effective. *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 are exhibiting “deliberate indifference” or “intentional disregard,” which will constitute intent to discriminate under a new legal doctrine being deployed by the TimeBanks USA 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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