



**Bringing Justice to the Youth Justice System
Alternatives That Work
D.C.'s Time Dollar Youth Court
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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. Washington, D.C.'s Time Dollar Youth Court is an example of one of these proven alternatives to detention and confinement.

HOW IT WORKS

Authorized in 1996 by the D.C. Superior Court, Time Dollar Youth Court (TDYC) transforms a youth's early encounters with the law into a turning point toward greater respect, responsibility, contributions to the community and other positive opportunities to become a better person. Youth in this program face a jury of their peers that deliberates and directs offenders to appropriate 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.

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.

RESULTS

A 1999 evaluation by the University of the District of Columbia Institute for Public Safety and Justice noted that, "During the grant period, the Youth Court successfully doubled the number of community hearing sites, increased the number of community service sites tenfold, reduced recidivism from 27% to 17% for those who successfully completed the program as compared to those who did not, and created a sense of civic awareness which jurors attributed to their Youth Court experiences."

In 2008, jurors working in TDYC heard 888 cases for offenses such as simple assault, possession with intent to distribute marijuana, and disorderly conduct. Recidivism rates during the first six months after referral to Time Dollar Youth Court were a mere 6% and twelve months after referral recidivism had

risen only to 11%. Both the six-month and one-year recidivism rates are far below the prevailing 33-35% rate for the comparison group from similar backgrounds charged with similar initial offenses

Going back beyond last year, TDYC has been tracking recidivism data since 2004. According to this data, youth who participate in the Youth Court program and successfully completed all sanctions, have a 5% recidivism rate at the six-month mark of their original arrest. Youth successfully completing the program at the one year mark have only a 9% recidivism rate. Since January 2003, all youth who were diverted to the Time Dollar Youth Court, whether successful or unsuccessful, only have an 11% re-arrest rate within one year.

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, with juvenile justice processing costs being many times more expensive. These low operation costs for youth courts are maintained through the programs' reliance on adult and youth volunteers.

In short, D.C.'s Time Dollar 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 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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