



New Bedford Youth Court History and Summary

June 2015

Youth Courts are juvenile diversion programs for young people who seem to be headed in the wrong direction. They are based on the principles of restorative justice and act as an alternative to the traditional juvenile justice system. Currently there are over 1,050 Youth Courts operating in 49 states nationally. Youth Courts are one of the fastest growing restorative justice programs in the nation.

Youth Court serves as a sentencing hearing for first-time offenders who have committed misdemeanor crimes or delinquent acts. They must acknowledge their guilt and agree along with their parent /guardian to accept a set of imposed sanctions determined by their peers. Youth and adult volunteers work as colleagues to achieve the goals of restoring justice to the victims, the respondents and the community. The goal of youth court is to hold a young person accountable, help them to make amends, and then to help reconnect them in a more positive way with their community. Each year more than 400 youth benefit from the youth court process, either as a respondent, a trained volunteer lawyer or a youth juror.

Typical respondents (offenders) are first time youthful offenders. Youth Court's peer driven process utilizes trained high school students to serve as prosecuting and defense attorneys arguing mitigating and aggravating circumstances. The respondents are encouraged to acknowledge the harm they have caused and must agree to accept a set of sanctions determined by a jury of their peers (youth volunteers ages 12 and older). The ultimate goal of the sanctions provided by the peer jury is to assist the respondent in building necessary skills that will help them reconnect with their community in a more positive way. The New Bedford Youth Court acts as an alternative to traditional prosecution. Schools, police and the Bristol County District Attorney's Office refer youth to Youth Court.

New Bedford Youth Court is overseen by Positive Action Against Chemical Addiction, Inc. (PAACA), a grass roots community based non profit organization, dedicated to providing quality youth programming and prevention services. Additionally, New Bedford Youth Court is governed by a volunteer Advisory Board comprised of 15 community organization and agencies such as schools, police, court personnel and other youth program providers. The Advisory Board assisted in the formation of the mission, goals and governing by-laws. Additionally, the board continues to meet to address youth courts progress, plans for growth and long term sustainability.

During the last 13 years, Youth Court has maintained a diverse funding portfolio that has allowed it to grow and continue to provide quality programming and services. Unfortunately, over the past 2-3 years initial funding sources (seed money) has dried up and the current financial state of the country and region has resulted in a severe reduction in funds or a total loss of funds previously provided. Prior funders included support from federal, state and local programs such as the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security (EOPSS), the Department of Education, the New



Bedford Schools, the City of New Bedford Invest In Kids effort, Bank of America, the Community Foundation of Southeastern MA, New Bedford Day Nursery Foundation, United Way, Southern New England School of Law and more. In addition, youth court operates on a tremendous amount of in-kind support including courtroom space, office space and volunteers provided by Greater New Bedford Vocational Technical High School, New Bedford Police Department and many others.

The average cost to process a young person through Youth Court and provide them with case management and sanctioned supportive programs is approximately \$1,200.00 per youth. From start to finish the average respondent spends approximately 6 months from referral to completion for a total of 180 days or \$6.66 per day. The average annual cost to incarcerate a youthful offender is upwards of \$30,000.00 per year or \$82.19 per day. As you can see, In kind support has been critical to the program success and the cost savings associated with the services we provide.

Youth Court operates on the most common of the four recognized federal models called the Adult Judge Model. A volunteer community lawyer, law enforcement officials or retired judge serves our court each week. We have had the benefit of amazing men and women serving as volunteer judges. Our local office of the Attorney General has been instrumental since our inception serving as volunteer judges, members of our Advisory Board, and trainers of our volunteer lawyer. In addition, many Assistant District Attorneys have served as volunteer judges, youth trainers and partnered on community service opportunities with the Youth Court respondents. **To date we have had 293 volunteers serve as judges for a total of 1,436 hours.**

To date, the New Bedford Youth Court has processed over 1,331 cases in its thirteen years of operation, averaging over 100 cases per year. Youth offenders range from ages 8-16. Offenses include school related acts, disorderly conduct, shoplifting, larceny and simple assault. Sanctions (or punishments) include community service, after school programming, tutoring, mentoring, self-help support groups, clinical assessments, apologies, curfews and more.

The New Bedford Youth Court has a high rate of compliance, averaging 90%. That means that the vast majority of respondents have completed their sanctions without becoming involved in the police or court system during their sanction period. This success can best be attributed to the following factors. Case managers assigned to each respondent who monitor their compliance throughout the four month (120 day) sanction period by working with the schools, providing school based visits, weekly communication with families and frequent interaction with the respondent. In addition, Youth Court has developed a wide range of constructive sanctioned programming that helps young people build basic life skills and coping mechanisms that have shown to redirect their prior behaviors in a more positive way. Youth court also sanctions many youth to supportive after school programming to assist with homework and tutoring. Non-compliance with any aspect of youth court or the sanctions typically results in a default to traditional prosecution or alternative punitive measures.

New Bedford Youth Court also benefits from a low recidivism rate. We have measured recidivism one year post youth court completion and three years post youth



court completion. Non- Recidivism is based on their ability to stay uninvolved with the police or traditional court system. The New Bedford Police Department assists youth court in tracking this data which includes new arrests, new charges or convictions. The average one year post completion rate is 84% and the three year post completion rate is 71%. **This translates to a recidivism rate of 15% 1 year out, and 29% 3 years later. These rates are almost a complete opposite of recidivism numbers at the juvenile court level where the majority of youthful offenders reoffend.**

A youth court stipulation requires every respondent be sanctioned to perform community service and engage in valuable service learning opportunities. Community service is chaperoned by the Community Service Coordinator in each community. The number of hours range from 8 to 100 hours per youth. **To date, Youth Court respondents have served 56,700 hours in a wide variety of valuable community service projects.** Community service is completed on Saturdays, after school and during school vacations. Supervision of community service is typically a 1:5 youth program coordinator: offender ratio. This allows for the respondents to build mentoring relationships with the staff as well as take on leadership roles within their working group. We have been able to develop a number of relationships in the community to work on projects such as: Gifts to Give, YMCA Farm, Project Clean Sweep, Gifts to Give, South Coast Hospitals, Cradles to Crayons, American Red Cross, area Churches, Public Libraries, Adopt a Shoreline, MLK Day and National Night Out. The respondents also take part in Service Learning Week Projects that focus on building life skills such as CPR training, painting, light carpentry, substance abuse prevention, cooking, etiquette, and job readiness.

The Office of the District Attorney, the Attorney General's Office, the local police departments and volunteer community lawyers, have assisted in training 390 youth volunteers to serve the court as lawyers. They have dedicated a combined 21,590 hours over the last 13 years. The average youth court volunteer dedicates an between 50-100 hours each year to this invaluable program. Youth Courts are organized and operated by youth with adults acting only as support roles. Youth volunteers are trained in all aspects of court etiquette and play the roles of prosecuting attorney, defense attorney, bailiff, clerk and jury. Initial training materials for volunteers have been developed and funded by the American Bar Association.

An additional 3,520 youth have volunteered to serve as one time jury members. Some jury members are actually sanctioned as part of their youth court experience as a respondent. However, most jurors are recruited volunteers ages 12-18. New Bedford Youth Court has developed relationships with New Bedford High School and Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High School (GNBRVTHS) to recruit and train jury members as part of their school curriculum. Youth court has been fully integrated into the Legal and Protective Services track at GNBRVTHS as well as the New Bedford High School Law and Legal classes. Their participation in youth court is part of their educational experience and counts as 20% of their overall course grade.



2015 New Bedford Public School Statistics

This school year alone we have served 96 New Bedford Public School Students as an alternative discipline/ alternative to juvenile court. We are still processing over 26 students and accept cases through the end of the school year.

- 80% of our referrals are coming from non-traditional homes.
- 72% of our referrals are male.
- Demographic Breakdown
 - 33% of our referrals were Hispanic,
 - 31% Caucasian,
 - 17% Cape Verdean,
 - 8% African American
 - 10% listed as other.
- 50% have self-disclosed that they are currently receiving or have received counselling in the past.
- 32% have self-disclosed that they are currently taking medication for psycho-social diagnosis.
- 46% of our referrals are receiving average grades of C and below.
- 38% of our referrals are self-disclosing they have been held back in school for at least one grade.
- 23% are self-disclosing they are on an IEP or 504 plan.

CRIMES

- 40% of the cases are Habitual School Offenders, Chronic disruptive, defiant and disrespectful behaviors in the classroom/ school.
- The other 60% of the cases that have been processed this year have been in the following categories: Possession of drugs/paraphernalia, Assault and Battery, Destruction of Property, Harassment/ Bullying, Larceny, Possession of a weapon and Truancy.

15 of the 25 New Bedford Public Schools have sent referrals this year.

We have **21 active Youth Court Volunteers** that prosecute and defend the cases. They have donated over **900 hours** of service to Youth Court this year.

We have had **404 students** participate in jury duty, donating **1600 hours** of the community service to the Youth Court process.