



The Partnership for Ontario County

Youth • Family • Community

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Youth Court

[Ontario County Youth Court](#) is a voluntary alternative to the traditional criminal justice system for young people who have committed certain violations, misdemeanors or have breached a student code of conduct. The goal of the Youth Court is to intervene in early anti-social or delinquent activities, reduce the incidence and teach new behaviors and coping skills.

This peer-based program is designed to promote education about the judicial process, promote accountability for actions and reinforce responsibility to society through community service and educational sentencing.

Why It Matters

Youth Court is the only peer-based court in Ontario County. The Youth Court is needed to continue positive outcomes for our youth who find themselves in first -time contact with the law or faced with the possibility of school suspension. Retired NYS Chief Justice Judith Kaye shares her perspective on Youth Courts in the January 2011 New York State Bar Journal by saying. "Should it really be our incarceration statistics that distinguish us as a nation, that we lock up more young people, and destroy more young families than any other nation in the world?. Why not second chances for deserving offenders to avoid the lifetime scar of arrest and conviction? Why not healthy programs in civic education and public service for youth court members?"

Youth Court is unique in that the program is youth staffed and youth directed. Not only do volunteers staff the courtroom, they determine the direction of the program and its development while learning the skills of leadership, public speaking, critical thinking, conflict resolution and mediation. This opportunity for meaningful civic engagement that delivers genuine community impact is unique.

Youthful offenders have the opportunity to make amends for their anti-social or delinquent activities, learn from their mistakes and continue forward with a "clean slate" while participating in a pro-social environment. Once they have completed their sentence requirements, offenders proceed with a "clean slate."

Results

With financial support from Ontario County, United Way, The Feinbloom Supporting Foundation and the New York State Bar Foundation, Youth Court has provided peer-directed intervention to juveniles and young adults accused of non-violent offenses since 2000. It is critical in today's tight budgets to ensure that services provided are effective and evidence based. While many programs point to national studies to provide evidence to support their effectiveness, Ontario County Youth Court has sought to validate its program by trying to learn as much as we can about the subsequent juvenile and criminal histories of the youth our volunteers have assisted.

Based on information available to Ontario County probation and juvenile officers in Canandaigua, Geneva and the Ontario County Sheriff, a review of recidivism from 2007-2012 was conducted in 2013. The statistics show that Youth Court is highly successful at diverting youth from further juvenile and adult offenses.

2007-2012: 91% of youthful offenders who participated in Youth Court completed their Youth Court sentence.

JUVENILE RECIDIVISM:

- 91% of youth who participated in the program had no further involvement in the juvenile justice system
- Only 4 were petitioned to Family Court for a juvenile delinquency offense

ADULT RECIDIVISM:

- 82% have not been charged with a Misdemeanor or Felony crime as an adult
- 92% have not been charged with an adult Misdemeanor or Felony crime within 3 years after Youth Court participation
- NONE of the adult participants spent time in a NYS prison

Get Involved

Youth Court accepts volunteer applications from youth age 13-19, from all nine school districts as well as home-schooled youth. Please [click here for the Youth Court application](#). Training takes place in the fall and spring. Adult volunteers who have a legal or education background are invited to participate as trainers and/or mentors in the courtroom.

Contact Deb Holland at 585-396-4519 or debOCYC@gmail.com. Our courtroom hearings are confidential, but we are always happy to schedule a mock hearing for groups or individuals interested in observing the courtroom process. For more information, visit OntarioCountyYouthCourt.com.

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The Partnership for Ontario County, Inc. added 2 new photos.
October 21 at 9:24am

Please join Jim Ritts from the Ontario County District Attorney's Office and Partnership Board member, and Jennifer Brownell, Program Director the Partnership's Child Advocacy Center who will participate on a panel discussion

Upcoming Events

OCT 27 Tue (http://partnershipforontariocounty.org/events-calendar/action-one)	7:00 pm A Community Forum on the Heroin ... @ Victor Early Childhood School (http://partnershipforontariocounty.org/event/a-community-forum-on-the-heroin-epidemic/?instance_id=38)
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By **Melody Burri** melody@messengerpostmedia.com

Print Page

April 13, 2014 6:00AM

Ontario County Youth Court offers youthful offenders a jury of their peers

They descend upon Victor Town Court from all parts of Ontario County — ahead of time, neatly dressed, purposeful in demeanor, respectful, but at home in their surroundings. The high-octane herd of 40 high school students may vary in age, appearance and background, but they're all after the same thing — justice.

The students are members of Ontario County Youth Court, which was established in 2000 as a program of the Partnership for Ontario County. A peer-based program, Youth Court is a voluntary alternative to the criminal justice system for young people who have committed a misdemeanor or violation or who have breached a student code of conduct.

The Youth Court's 70 to 80 student volunteers are committed, even driven, to provide what they believe is an essential service to their peers. Parents are grateful for an alternative for their errant teens — and even student offenders who appear in Youth Court, for the most part, express appreciation for a chance to have a clean slate.

Student-run, leader-inspired

Now in her 14th year as Ontario County Youth Court director, Deborah Holland has seen her volunteer ranks swell from just 15 students the first year to 72 students in 2013-14. Since both she and the Youth Court program began in 2000, no fewer than 600 students from age 13 to 19 have stepped into the jury box, donned a judge's robe, or argued as defense counsel or prosecution. Some have even followed through with a career in law.

"They know that it looks great on a college application, but it's not just about that," said Holland. "They've seen what they're able to do for other people, and that's what they really, really want to be doing — not just locally, but nationally and even globally."

Though Holland would credit students for the success of the youth-driven program, the Association of New York Youth Courts chose to name her Outstanding Youth Court Director at its annual conference in 2013. Students, law enforcement officers and district attorneys agree with that choice.

"In Ontario County, Deb Holland is the driving factor and the major reason of the success of the Youth Court," said Ontario County Sheriff Philip Povero. "She gives countless hours to the program in the hopes that the young people involved in Youth Court will learn from the experience, never re-offend and go on to be successful adults."

Averaging between 60 and 75 volunteers each school year, Youth Court has a student population that is very diverse, Holland said, and that's something she loves. Some start as early as grade 8 or 9, and continue until they graduate, she said.

Though Holland's guidance is unmistakable, the Partnership for Ontario County program is indeed youth-staffed and youth-directed. So not only do student volunteers populate the courtroom, they literally determine the direction of the program and its development through an elected steering committee.

"Once I got started with the program and saw the difference it could make for not just our offenders but for my volunteers — it's a great program," Holland said.

Countywide impact

The program's influence is not contained within the courtroom walls, according to Povero.

The Youth Court has had an identifiable impact on the elimination of young teenagers from the criminal justice system, particularly in terms of recidivism, or relapse into criminal behavior, the sheriff said.

"Youth Court participants are less likely to get themselves involved in a situation that would introduce them into the criminal justice system again," he said. "Someone who has offended is not likely to reoffend."

And the rate of incarceration in adult males ages 16 to 18 is lower than it has been in past years, Povero said.

"Clearly, programs such as Youth Court play a role in that reduction," he said. "The message is getting through."

Ontario County First Assistant District Attorney Brian Dennis started with the Youth Court in 2004 and was heavily involved in the training process.

"The kids oftentimes are excellent students who aspired to be lawyers, judges or police officers," Dennis said of Youth Court volunteers. "The benefits were really noticeable in all phases, and the training process I found to be very good for the students who served."

As for the offenders who opted to go to Youth Court, Dennis said the entire process — whether it was a letter of apology they had to write, or community service — is not something that just ended in one night.

"I believe it had an impact on those who agreed to come," said Dennis. "It makes a big difference when you have your peers judging you as opposed to adults. It changed them — you could see it and would say some of them were diverted from committing crimes in the future."

Povero referred to Youth Court as "one of his favorite" initiatives.

"It's young people hearing from other young people that they have to be accountable for their actions," he said.

Who's taking the stand?

This voluntary alternative to probation, or possibly family court, is a golden opportunity, said Holland.

"In order to have your case heard in Youth Court," Holland said, "you would have to be 10 to 18 years old; you would have committed a first-time offense or a school violation; you would have said 'yes, I did this, I'm guilty as charged;' and you'd be willing to be accountable for your actions and make amends for what



PHOTO/ SETH BINNIX/MESSENGER POST MEDIA

Meghan Prusinowski, left, of Canandaigua, and Grace Trombley, of Victor, discuss their roles as judge and bailiff in Ontario County Youth Court. The peer-based program established in 2000 gives youthful offenders an opportunity to have a clean slate.

you've done."

Typical cases include shoplifting, harassment, criminal mischief, trespassing, petit larceny and drug and alcohol offenses. Both the offender and the offender's parent or guardian must agree to participate in Youth Court.

"Once the sentence is completed," Holland said, "the case is sealed up and you can say 'I've never been in trouble with the law before.' So it's a great opportunity for a clean slate and to just move on and not have that hanging over your head anymore. And, for kids, that's really important."

By coming to the program, said Victor sophomore and steering committee member Joey Loffredo, defendants gain the right to a fair and unbiased trial, a chance to repair any harm done and an opportunity to learn some skills that will prevent future wrongdoing.

"We don't decide guilt," said Canandaigua Academy junior Emily Guerri. "We give tools to become effective members of society."

About the volunteers

As impactful as the program is for defendants who appear, it also changes the lives of students who volunteer.

Canandaigua's Guerri has served on Youth Court for two years, functioning as a juror, judge, bailiff, prosecution team member, defense team member, jury foreperson and steering committee member. Eventually she hopes to become a doctor.

Canandaigua Academy senior Meg Prusinowski is in her third year with Youth Court and also serves on its steering committee. An invitation from another student at a school clubs and activities fair first piqued her curiosity. Now, three years later, she can't imagine herself without having had the Youth Court experience.

Victor's Joey Loffredo has been a part of Youth Court for just over a year. He's a member of the steering committee and has served as judge, prosecution attorney and jury foreperson. He had noticed Youth Court listed on his high school's community service website, and he knew instantly it was an opportunity he couldn't pass up. Eventually, he hopes to pursue a legal career.

Guerri, Prusinowski and Loffredo, along with 69 of their peers from Ontario County high schools, hold court monthly in Victor and Geneva. There they hone skills that they'll use in virtually every area of their adult lives, Holland said.

"They learn leadership skills, public speaking, conflict resolution, mediation and critical thinking — they really have to think on their feet, they have to really learn to listen," she said. "All those things are really life skills you'll take with you wherever you go."

Not without its challenges

Prusinowski said the biggest obstacle she's had to overcome is public speaking. Anxiety over the possibility of becoming tongue-tied resulted in her making more mistakes, which then jacked up her stress level.

"I was never a big public speaker," she said. "I still don't care for it that much, but now I'm more comfortable with speaking in front of my peers. I've made mistakes speaking, and I've learned to deal with them and not get stressed over the little things that come out wrong because no one minds."

Prusinowski said she's learned a lot about public speaking from her colleagues, which in turn has helped her feel more comfortable with her own abilities.

Guerri concurred, confessing that when she first began, she was "a terrible public speaker" and knew the hours of Youth Court training she would take included coaching in public speaking.

"I would never have imagined I could attain the level I've attained now," Guerri said.

For Loffredo, the most difficult part of serving lies in creative sentencing.

"The biggest challenge of serving is making sure we render a fair sentence," said Loffredo. "Our program, rather than operating on the punitive approach to justice and just giving a harsh punishment, operates on the principle of restorative justice."

Loffredo said the objective is creating a balanced sentence for defendants, one that cultivates civilized behavior while also making the defendants accountable for their actions.

"It is sometimes hard to think of what will benefit the defendant in the future, rather than just throwing the book at them," he said.

A rewarding experience

One big motivator for law school-bound students like Loffredo is the opportunity to learn about the criminal justice system.

"As a Youth Court member, I gain the opportunity to learn skills that will last me a lifetime, including public speaking, interviewing skills and mediation skills," Loffredo said. "I gain the chance to make a difference in someone's life, and that alone is truly rewarding. And even better, I gain a chance to earn community service and be part of a program that looks great on a college application."

Both Loffredo and Guerri are grateful for the number of friends they've made and the impact Youth Court has had on the defendants who pass through.

"It has given me the opportunity to work with so many people and make so many new friends," said Prusinowski. "I have come out of my comfort zone to the point where now I am one of the first to volunteer to go to any Youth Court event so that I may share my experiences and encourage others to join. This program has come to mean so much to me. It has given me new skills and helped me to grow as a person and as a member of my community."

Impact on offenders

"Most of the kids who come to Youth Court have made a mistake," said Prusinowski. "They did something without thinking about it and ended up breaking the law. One mistake during high school, and now suddenly they have a mark on their record that follows them around forever."

Instead of hiring an attorney, going to family court and possibly being on probation, they go to Youth Court and get a second chance, Prusinowski said. Unless they decide to share what they did with others, no one will know. And perhaps most important, if they complete their sentence, they'll have a clean slate.

"It takes a lot of courage for these kids to stand up in front of their peers and admit that they stole or vandalized something or used drugs or alcohol, knowing that we are there to pass judgment on them," Prusinowski said. "We do our best to give our offenders a constructive sentence, a sentence that will allow them to make up for the harm they have caused, while giving them the opportunity to learn to make better choices in the future."

Prusinowski believes former offenders are actually learning from their mistakes and making better decisions.

"One thing we do in Youth Court is encourage defendants who have community service as part of their sentence to come back and serve as jurors to help fulfill some of their hours," she said. "Those who come back often have very interesting and appropriate insight into other cases. We have actually had a few defendants go through Youth Court and then come back after completing their sentence and become Youth Court members themselves. That is how much our program means."

Often when defendants come in, their worlds are turned upside-down, said Guerri.

"This is their first offense, and they're nervous and disappointed in themselves," she said. "But when they walk out, the kids feel like they have the skills to better themselves and become a more productive member of society."

About confidentiality

TV commercials promise tourists who visit Nevada's casino capital that "what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas." But is that same anonymity a reality for

offenders who appear in Youth Court one day and see jury members in the school hallway the next day?

Prusinowski, Guerri and Loffredo agree it most definitely is.

"In our program, we have a strict confidentiality policy, meaning that no information can leave the courtroom," said Loffredo. "So in terms of interacting with them later, once the case is heard, there is no mention of it and life resumes as normal."

Prusinowski said she would not think of saying anything about a person's case outside of the courtroom, even to her parents.

"That is the beauty of Youth Court," Prusinowski said. "The confidentiality we offer the offenders ensures that they will have a second chance to make better choices without their previous actions coming back to haunt them."

In addition, if a Youth Court volunteer has a personal relationship with a defendant that would prohibit objectivity, the volunteer is not able to serve on the defendant's case, Guerri said.

"We have the opportunity to remove ourselves from the case if we know our connections with the defendant will affect our ruling," said Loffredo.

Because of the code, Guerri said, offenders are not concerned about a violation of trust.

"That's one of the comforts of Youth Court — nothing is on the record," she said. "It's completely clean. The majority of the defendants are really thankful for the opportunity."

Tomorrow's volunteers

With an eye on his career and the future, Loffredo is sold on Youth Court as a great opportunity for anyone interested in learning about law, making a difference in someone's life and gaining the chance to have a valuable addition to a college application.

While Guerri encourages her peers to "give Youth Court a try" and find out just how rewarding it is, Prusinowski also cautions that the experience requires a commitment.

"Youth Court is not a program where you can only show up once or twice and say you are a part of it," Prusinowski said. "It takes many hours and work to be trained. However, the rewards far more than outweigh the time it takes to get to become a member."

In addition to the fulfillment that comes from making a difference in the lives of peers, Prusinowski said the experience has helped shape her in ways that will serve her for a lifetime.

"I have learned to be far more understanding and tolerant of those who come from backgrounds different from mine," said Prusinowski. "I have learned not to judge those I meet based on what they came to court for. I have become aware of how much we subconsciously stereotype the people we meet, and I am continuing to work on my own awareness of my first impressions and opinions of people."

"The only thing I regret," she said, "is not having joined earlier."

By Melody Burri
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October 15, 2015 11:41PM

Ontario County Youth Court celebrates 15 years

Ontario County Youth Court applauded for 15 years of service at Partnership for Ontario County annual meeting, appreciation dinner

CLIFTON SPRINGS — Ask Ontario County Youth Court Director Deb Holland if her program is essential to the Ontario County community and she won't even blink before answering in the affirmative.

It's important because it helps "ensure a future for all our children, whether they've made a mistake or whether they haven't."

The program — a voluntary alternative to traditional juvenile justice in which youthful offenders appear before a court of their peers and have the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions — is 15 years old this year. It was the focus of Thursday's annual Partnership for Ontario County business meeting and appreciation dinner.

"We're celebrating success tonight," said Ontario County Sheriff Phil Povero. "So many have worked so hard, but there's one person who has given her heart, her soul, her entire effort on a daily basis to make sure Youth Court survives. Youth Court is what it is today because of its director, Deb Holland."

The program, which hears about 50 cases and trains 40 volunteers annually, has an impressive track record: 92 percent of students ages 16-18 who have appeared before Youth Court have no further involvement in the juvenile justice system, and have not been charged with the commission of an adult misdemeanor or felony crime within three years.

"It's such a privilege to be a part of it," said Holland. "It's such a wonderful opportunity to watch our kids grow, to watch our volunteers become leaders, to watch them learn public speaking, to watch them learn to be confident. To watch them work as a team is absolutely phenomenal.

"And for our offenders, to see them accept responsibility for their actions and be able to move forward with a clean slate — I'm so proud of all my kids, no matter which side of this they're on," she said. "I'm just so proud of them."

Youth Court is part of the county-wide prevention strategy that's shrinking the youth population in the Ontario County Jail, Povero said. The numbers over the last 15 years prove it.

"And prevention is so much more valuable than rehabilitation or corrective action," he said. "If we can prevent, we prevent the law enforcement piece, the criminal justice piece, the incarceration piece. And for so many reasons, prevention is much more positive, not only financially, but for the impact it has on people, their friends, their families, their careers, their education. Prevention is the key, and we always need to remember that any effort toward prevention is worth more than its weight in the cost of trying to solve the problem after it's created."

In the last two years, Partnership for Ontario County has grown its service to the community by 80 percent, said Partnership Executive Director Bonnie Ross at Thursday's dinner.

Programs and initiatives under the umbrella of Partnership for Ontario County include Ontario County Youth Court, Child Advocacy Center of the Finger Lakes, Family Support Centers, Partnership for Success, Never Alone Club, With Youth For Youth, and Youth Mental Health First Aid.

"These are programs that the government isn't going to do, and the private sector isn't going to do," Ross said. "These are programs that keep kids from falling through the cracks."

Partnership for Ontario County programs and initiatives

— Ontario County Youth Court is a voluntary alternative to traditional juvenile justice where defendants who choose Youth Court appear before a court of their peers and have the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions.

— Child Advocacy Center of the Finger Lakes is a child-friendly location where allegations of physical or sexual abuse are responded to by a multidisciplinary team of professionals who work together to conduct a thorough investigation and provide necessary support services to children and their non-offending parents.

— Family Support Centers provide free prevention and intervention counseling to youth and families in participating Ontario County school districts. Currently there are Family Support Counseling Centers in Canandaigua, Phelps-Clifton Springs, Geneva and Marcus Whitman school districts.

— Partnership for Success is a multiple-community coalition that meets regularly to implement strategies to reduce medication and heroin abuses. It presents educational forums and helps organize community take-back days of unwanted medications. To date, 500 people have attended heroin forums in Geneva, Canandaigua and Victor, and more than 9,000 pounds of unwanted prescription drugs have been collected and properly disposed of.



Gabby Seeber, one of the first volunteers in Ontario County Youth Court at its inception 15 years ago, shares the impact it had on her life and career. Melody Burri/Messenger Post Media

– Never Alone Club provides a fun, safe, and alcohol- and drug-free place for students to be on Saturday nights. Special events include camping, bowling, geocaching, picnics and workshops.

– With Youth For Youth is an initiative of area communities working together to provide youth-friendly activities.

– Youth Mental Health First Aid is a national project designed to help adults working with youth to understand the prevalence of various mental health issues and the need to reduce stigma in communities.

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