

How does it work?

What is it?

How do I start one?

Who can help?

Teen Court

By age 13, "Tim" was a troublemaker. He graduated from truancy to vandalism to retail theft. He was gaining a bad reputation with the police and social services. Last fall, after a retail theft arrest, he was referred to the La Crosse County Peer Court, which usually only handles first-time offenders who are cited for ordinance violations. His referral was the result of a clerical error, but still, in November, he appeared before a six-person tribunal made up of youth between the ages of 12 and 17.

Tim tried to explain his actions and thoughts. His peers asked questions about his friends, home life, plans, and goals. After a short deliberation, the tribunal sentenced Tim to write a 1,000-word essay on the effects of theft on the community and how he planned to gain back the trust of his parents. He also had to perform 15 hours of community service, apologize verbally to the store manager, and serve three terms on the Peer Court.

Seven months later, a police officer who had started to think of Tim as a habitual offender told former Peer Court Coordinator Tracey Pederson he had not seen Tim since the last incident that brought him before the Peer Court. The program worked.

How Does Teen Court Work?

Since 1997, Judge Bruce K. Schmidt has spent several Wednesday nights on the bench in the Winnebago County Courthouse. He is one of many volunteers, both adults and teens, busy preparing for court. The attorneys, bailiff, jurors, and judge are there to hear the explanations of juveniles who have already admitted to committing offenses such as vandalism and shoplifting. Everyone in the room, except the judge and a few other volunteers, is under 19 years old. This is

the Winnebago County Teen Court, the first of its kind in the state. Now, three years after Winnebago took the plunge, Bayfield, Brown, Iowa, Jefferson, La Crosse, Rock, Sheboygan, Trempealeau, Vilas, and Waupaca have followed suit, as have the municipalities of De Forest, Monona, Sun Prairie, Wausau, and Menomonee Falls. Barron and Fond du Lac counties and the municipality of Marshfield are considering starting programs.

Teen court programs come in many forms—from three- to five-person teen tribunals that recommend sentencing, as in the La Crosse Peer Court; to a more formal court process where attorneys, bailiffs, clerks, and jurors are all volunteer teens and the judge is an adult, usually a municipal or circuit court judge, law enforcement officer, attorney or other community member (the adult judge model), as in the Winnebago program.

When Richard van Benschoten, state staff specialist at the University of Wisconsin Extension, is called on to help develop a program, he encourages organizers to create a court that will suit their particular situation. "Let that community decide what direction they want to go," said van

Benschoten, who has assisted the Bayfield, Iowa, Trempealeau, Vilas, and Winnebago Teen Courts. Typically, teen courts hear the cases of juveniles between the ages of 12 and 17 who have committed one non-violent offense or who

Teen Court Models:

Adult Judge Model: an adult judge rules on court procedure and clarifies legal terminology, youth volunteer as defense and prosecuting attorneys and jurors (may also serve as bailiff and clerk).

Youth Judge Model: similar to Adult Judge Model, but a juvenile serves as judge.

Tribunal Model: youth serve as defense and prosecuting attorneys to present cases to a juvenile judge(s) who determines sentence.

Resource: "Teen Court: A National Movement," Technical Assistance Bulletin No. 17, American Bar Association, by Paula A. Nessel, 1998

"It's a win-win situation. Teen court is good for volunteer jurors and attorneys to see how a court operates, and it works for the defendants and their families . . . because peer juries can see through a bad attitude and defendants are more likely to listen to their peers instead of an adult."

**Judge Bruce Schmidt,
Winnebago County Circuit Court**

are minor repeat offenders. In most programs, offenders must admit guilt and agree to abide by the program's decision before the court accepts their case.

Offenders usually appear in court with a parent or guardian. The offender is given an opportunity to explain his/her actions, either directly or through a defense attorney, who is a fellow juvenile. Parents may be asked what sanctions they have imposed and victims may be given an opportunity to tell how they were affected by the crime. The point of this discussion is to give the jury or tribunal a better idea of what happened and whether the teen is remorseful.

After the discussion, the jury recommends a sentence, often based on a list of sentencing options and guidelines. Sentences can include one or several of the following: jury duty in teen court, community service, an apology letter to the victim, essays, mentoring, restitution or counseling (for drug or alcohol abuse, anger management, or decision making skills). The goals are restitution to the community and victims, accountability, and development as responsible citizens.

If the juvenile completes the sentence, the offense is removed from the record. On the other hand, if the teen does not comply with the court's sanctions, he or she is referred back to the court system to either appear before a judge or pay a fine, and the incident will remain on his/her record.

Why Teen Court?

According to the American Probation and Parole Association, there were about 50 teen courts operating in 14 states in 1991. As of 1999, there were at least 560 courts reported in 47 states. The teen court movement may be growing because evaluations suggest that these alternative sentencing programs can reduce the likelihood of recidivism, offer restitution to the community in the form of community service, improve restitution to victims, and help teens become better citizens by improving their understanding of the court system (indicated by pre- and post-testing of participants).

In Sheboygan County, Teen Court Manager Jeanne M. Jentsch monitors juveniles' compliance with their sentences. She keeps in touch with them by telephone and in writing, watching their school attendance and any encounters with police, and confirming that they are following the teen court's orders. During the last 12-month period, 38 youth offenders completed the Sheboygan County program; two committed a second offense.

In just over a year, the Brown County Teen Court heard 304 cases; of those, 194 juveniles successfully completed their sentences, 46 were referred back to the municipal court, and the remaining juveniles are currently completing their sentences. And while this is only a small percentage of the juvenile offenders in the traditional court system, it

indicates that the type of offenses directed to teen court may be well suited to this approach. In addition, teen courts divert less serious offenses from the circuit courts so that judges can focus on the more difficult or serious cases.

How Are Teen Courts Funded?

Teen courts in Wisconsin are funded through county human services departments, county boards, school districts, the United Way, the Office of Justice Assistance, and private donations. Many also receive in-kind contributions of space from county courthouses and other city and county facilities. In addition, some courts charge a small fee for their services, while others hold annual fundraisers.

"Grants usually provide seed money for the first year," according to van Benschoten, "and [operational] costs are almost non-existent, especially for a tribunal court."

For example, the Trempealeau County Teen Court operates on \$250 per year and the contribution of space in the Trempealeau County Courthouse, according to Court Coordinator Kevin M. Larson, who is also district administrator for the Independence School District. Two years ago the program received a \$500 donation from the Trempealeau Alliance for Youth. That money is used

Steps to Implementing a Teen Court

Seek advice and input from key persons in the community (judges, law enforcement, probation departments, lawyers, schools, youth-serving agencies, etc.) and people listed under "Resources."

Assess community needs (magnitude of juvenile crime, types of offenders and offenses, existence of other juvenile diversion programs, etc.) and resources (services for youth, financial and human resources available).

Explore legal issues that may impact the program.

Create an advisory board, including key persons listed above.

Define the program's purpose, goals, and objectives.

Identify target population.

Consider staffing issues (some programs need only a part-time coordinator, others have several staff members).

Develop policies and procedures for referrals, case management, training, etc.

Identify and secure financial and in-kind support for the program.

Secure services for the program and its clients, such as arrangements for sentencing options (community service locations, educational classes, peer discussion groups, mentoring).

Promote awareness of the program (press releases, posters in schools).

Devise evaluation and result tracking procedures.

Resource: *Peer Justice and Youth Empowerment*, American Probation and Parole Association, by Tracy M. Godwin, 1998

to teach conflict resolution skills to the students who serve on the court's three-person tribunals.

Often teen courts require hiring a coordinator to train and manage volunteers, assist with intake, and process cases. The budget for these programs ranges from \$20,000 to \$60,000 annually.

"It's a win-win situation," according to Judge Schmidt. "Teen court is good for volunteer jurors and attorneys to see how a court operates, and it works for the defendants and their families...because peer juries can see through a bad attitude and defendants are more likely to listen to their peers instead of an adult."

Resources

The National Teen Court Center of the American Probation and Parole Association provides training and technical assistance and serves as an information clearinghouse to youth court programs in the United States. Visit the Center's Web site at www.youthcourt.net or contact them at: National Youth Court Center, c/o American Probation and Parole Association, P.O. Box 11910, Lexington, KY 40578-1910; phone: 606-244-8215; fax: 606-244-8001; e-mail: nycc@csq.org.

Peer Justice and Youth Empowerment: An Implementation Guide for Teen Court Programs by the American Probation and Parole Association is available free by calling 800-636-8736, or on the Association Web site at www.ncjrs.org/peerhome.htm.

The University of Wisconsin Extension can help counties and schools develop a teen court program that suits their particular needs. Contact Rich van Benschoten, state staff specialist, at 608-262-5020, or e-mail at vanbenschoten@admin.uwex.edu.

The Volunteers in the Courts Initiative of the Wisconsin Supreme Court has program descriptions and contact people for all reported teen courts operating in the state. Contact Karen Leone de Nie at 608-266-1298, or by e-mail at karen.leonedenie@courts.state.wi.us.

The Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance helps jurisdictions find teen court funding. Call 608-266-3323 or visit their Web site at <http://oja.state.wi.us/>.

The Wisconsin Teen Court Association has resource people who can provide technical assistance to start a program. To learn more about the Association, contact Nancy Anne Livingston, Vilas County Teen Court coordinator, at 715-479-3648.

Wisconsin Teen Courts

Following is a list of teen court programs operating in Wisconsin. The coordinators can share their experiences in establishing and/or operating a teen court in the state.

Bayfield County Teen Court (tribunal model)

Bayfield Social Services - Children's Division

P.O. Box 308

Washburn, WI 54891

Volunteers: 7

Volunteer Sources: Local high school students

Budget: \$500

Budget Sources: Bayfield County Social Services

Coordinator: Bridget Larson

Telephone: 715-373-6144

Fax: 715-373-6130

E-mail: baycodhs@ncis.net

Participating Judge: Hon. Thomas J. Gallagher

Telephone: 715-373-6118

Brown County Teen Court (adult judge model)

Family Service Association

P.O. Box 22308

Green Bay, WI 54305

Volunteers: 120

Volunteer Sources: Local high school students and local bar association members

Budget: \$60,000

Budget Sources: Office of Justice Assistance

Coordinator: Jill Diedrick

Telephone: 920-436-4360, ext. 1392

Fax: 920-432-5966

Brown County, Green Bay Youth Court (adult judge model)

Family Services and the Green Bay School District

P.O. Box 22308

Green Bay, WI 54305

Volunteers: information not provided

Volunteer Sources: information not provided

Budget: part of \$2,785,000 grant

Budget Sources: Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative (U.S. Departments of Education, Justice, and Health & Human Services)

Coordinator: Mary Ellen Mershon

Telephone: 920-436-4360, ext. 1393

Fax: 920-432-5966

Dane County, De Forest Teen Court (tribunal model)

Village of De Forest

305 E. Holum Street

De Forest, WI 53532

Volunteers: 12

Volunteer Sources: local high school students

Budget: information not provided

Budget Sources: information not provided

Coordinator: Hon. Phillip Goedderz

Telephone: 608-846-6782

Dane County, Monona Teen Court (tribunal model)

Community Adolescent Programs, Inc.

1955 Atwood Avenue

Madison, WI 53704

Volunteers: information not provided**Volunteer Sources:** local high school students**Budget:** information not provided**Budget Sources:** Juvenile Accountability Block Grant (Office of Justice Assistance)**Coordinator:** Elise Schaffer**Telephone:** 608-245-2550, ext. 203**Dane County, Sun Prairie Teen Court (tribunal model)**

Community Adolescent Programs, Inc.

1955 Atwood Avenue

Madison, WI 53704

Volunteers: information not provided**Volunteer Sources:** local high school students**Budget:** information not provided**Budget Sources:** Juvenile Accountability Block Grant (Office of Justice Assistance)**Coordinator:** Elise Schaffer**Telephone:** 608-245-2550, ext. 203**Iowa County Teen Court (adult judge model)**

Iowa County Circuit Court

222 S. Iowa Street

Dodgeville, WI 53533

Volunteers: 70**Volunteer Sources:** Youth and adults from community and school officials**Budget:** \$50,000**Budget Sources:** Office of Justice Assistance**Coordinator:** Marcia Richgels-Hill**Telephone:** 608-935-0387**Fax:** 608-935-0386**E-mail:** teencrt@mhtc.net**Participating Judge:** Hon. William Dyke**Telephone:** 608-935-5812**Jefferson County Teen Court**

Diversified Personal Services

111 North First Street

Watertown, WI 53094

Volunteers: 35**Volunteer Sources:** Service groups, business leaders, public defenders, district attorney, and middle and high schools**Budget:** information not provided**Budget Sources:** Jefferson County Human Services Department and Office of Justice Assistance**Coordinator:** Shelly Nelson**Telephone:** 920-261-8444**Fax:** 920-261-8454**La Crosse County Peer Court (tribunal model)**

1331 Clinton Street

La Crosse, WI 54602

Volunteers: 22**Volunteer Sources:** Law enforcement officials, hospital personnel, attorneys, students and adult community members**Budget:** \$22,000**Budget Sources:** La Crosse County Human Services Department, \$20,000 and private donations (contracted to the Boys & Girls Club of Greater La Crosse)**Coordinator:** vacant**Telephone:** 608-784-3345**Fax:** 608-782-3933**Marathon County, Wausau Peer Court (tribunal model)**

115 Scott Street

Wausau, WI 54403

Volunteers: 19**Volunteer Sources:** Word-of-mouth and advertising**Budget:** information not available**Budget Sources:** Office of Justice Assistance and Marathon County Social Services**Coordinator:** Linda Larson**Telephone:** 715-845-2582**Fax:** 715-845-0940**Rock County Teen Court (adult judge model)**

Lutheran Social Services

612 North Randall

Janesville, WI 53545

Volunteers: 20**Volunteer Sources:** Local high schools and the offices of the county public defender and district attorney**Budget:** \$30,000**Budget Sources:** County Board**Coordinator:** Carrie Van Horn, Jim Gay**Telephone:** Van Horn, 608-752-7660, ext. 11; Gay,

608-363-6226

Sheboygan County Teen Court (adult judge model)

Lutheran Social Services

1337 N. Taylor Drive

Sheboygan, WI 53081

Volunteers: 65**Volunteer Sources:** Youth and adult community members**Budget:** \$29,000**Budget Sources:** Office of Justice Assistance (contracted to Lutheran Social Services), and county funding**Coordinator:** Jeanne Jentsch**Telephone:** 920-803-6322**Fax:** 920-458-5670**E-mail:** jjentsch@lsswis.org

Trempealeau County Teen Court (tribunal model)

Trempealeau County Courthouse

P.O. Box 67

Whitehall, WI 54773-0067

Volunteers: 35

Volunteer Sources: Youth and adult community members

Budget: \$1,000

Budget Sources: Trempealeau County Alliance for Youth

Coordinator: Jill Clark

Telephone: 715-538-2311, ext. 264

Fax: 715-538-4400

Participating Judge: Hon. John A. Damon

Telephone: 715-538-2311, ext. 239

Vilas County Teen Court (tribunal model)

Vilas County Courthouse

330 Court Street

Eagle River, WI 54521

Volunteers: 12

Volunteer Sources: Local schools, community members, teachers and county employees

Budget: information not provided

Budget Sources: information not provided

Coordinator: Nancy Anne Livingston

Telephone: 715-479-3648

Fax: 715-479-1978

E-mail: nancy.livingston@ces.uwex.edu

Participating Judge: Hon. James B. Mohr

Telephone: 715-479-3633

Waukesha County, Menomonee Falls Teen Court (adult judge model)

W156N8480 Pilgrim Road

Menomonee Falls, WI 53051-3140

Volunteers: 60

Volunteer Sources: local high schools, law firms

Budget: information not provided

Budget Sources: information not provided

Coordinator: Harry Goetz and Richard Schwabenland

Telephone: 262-250-8240

Participating Judge: Hon. Michael C. Hurt

Telephone: 414-251-8809

Waupaca County Teen Court (tribunal model) Waupaca

County Courthouse

811 Harding Street

Waupaca, WI 54981-2087

Volunteers: n/a

Volunteer Sources: n/a

Budget: \$71,000

Budget Sources: Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act grant (Office of Justice Assistance)

Coordinator: n/a

Telephone: n/a

Participating Judge: Hon. John P. Hoffman

Telephone: 715-258-6425

Winnebago County Teen Court (adult judge model)

Winnebago County Courthouse

415 Jackson Drive

P.O. Box 2808

Oshkosh, WI 54903

Volunteers: 200

Volunteer Sources: Schools and community presentations to service groups

Budget: \$60,000

Budget Sources: information not provided

Coordinator: Patti Jorgensen

Telephone: 920-236-1120

Fax: 920-424-7780

Participating Judge: Hon. Bruce K. Schmidt

Telephone: 920-236-4918

11/2000