

# **Woodbury County**

## **TEEN COURT PANEL**

The Teen Court panel helps neighborhoods deal effectively with first time youth offenders. A panel of local community volunteer teens meets with the young first time offender and his/her family to discuss the offense. The panel holds the youth accountable for their actions by requiring community service, educational programs, a panel fee, specific restitution if applicable, and service on a panel for other youth, or forms of reconciling with the community and/or victims.

### **How It Works:**

- 1. Referral:** Juvenile Court Services offers the offender the opportunity to go before the panel instead of heading to court. The Department will refer appropriate youth who have committed minor offenses such as possession of alcohol, theft, criminal trespass, and simple assault. In order to participate, the juvenile must admit involvement in the offense to the JCO and agree to meet with the panel.
- 2. The Panel Session:** Panelists will be coached in conflict resolution, decision making, consensus building, and the juvenile justice system. The panel meets with the family and the youth together. The session is a voluntary and confidential process that can be stopped at any time. If the offense involves a victim, the victim is invited to meet with the panel to discuss the offense and their input may help the panel form the resolution. Panelists will be assisted in the process by the Teen Court Coordinator.
- 3. The Resolution Contract:** The panel does not decide guilt or innocence. The panel develops a program of community service, educational activities, or other forms of paying back to the community. Restitution (if needed) is handled by Juvenile Court Services. Each resolution is customized to the offense and abilities of the individual. The youth contracts (Informal Adjustment Agreement) with the panel to complete the resolution within a specified time
- 4. Completion:** When the resolution is completed, the panel and the youth meet again to discuss his/her experience and the panel will recommend (after successful resolution of the offense) that the juvenile complaint will be dismissed successfully. If for any reason the youth fails to complete the resolution or commits another offense, the case is returned to Juvenile Court Services for further action.

## **Benefits:**

1. The juvenile and his/her parents do not enter into the justice system, with all of the stigmas, costs and detriments of a juvenile record attached.
2. The juvenile has a chance to directly work off his/her offense through some positive community action or service.
3. The juvenile and his/her parents witness the care and concern of their community.
4. Victims, parents, Juvenile Court Services personnel, and police do not waste valuable time and money waiting in or outside of a courtroom, sometimes never to be called upon for their input.
5. The juvenile and parents have an opportunity to access additional resources within their community.
6. The Juvenile Court Services and possibly the Sioux City Community School District, has another tool to deal with minor first-time offenses.
7. Community panel members are educated by the cases they hear; problems of other local youth become clearer; they learn conflict resolution, decision-making skills and leadership skills; gain knowledge of the judicial system; and they experience the value of becoming more involved in their communities.
8. Hopefully, the panels will provide information and input into the decisions of their community which involve all young people, not just those in trouble.
9. Teen Justice Panels are customized to meet the needs of the community.
10. The program will save Woodbury County and the State of Iowa monies and other valuable resources.

Nationwide, panels collectively average a 90% completion rate for the contracts they enter with youth. The effectiveness of the Teen Justice Panel can also be measured by the intangible results. Youth are held accountable for their actions, are less likely to enter the criminal system, are prevented from using alcohol and other drugs. They receive career guidance, positive adult mentoring and life skills.

**Who are the Panelists?** All panelists live in the local community that they serve. The panels are not a part of the Juvenile Justice system, but rather a diversion from the system. Panels consist of four to six people. Panel members are responsible for a referred case from start to completion. The Teen Court Coordinator will oversee the case and report to Juvenile Court Services. The Coordinator will be the only paid position in the program. Woodbury County Juvenile Court Services will assist in finding and overseeing community services sites and resources.

## **Training:**

Each community panelist receives formal training which includes:

1. An overview of the Juvenile Justice System
2. Information about group process, conflict resolution, decision-making, team building and leadership,
3. Information about abuse of alcohol and other criminal offenses and options.

## **A Collaborative Effort:**

The Teen Court Panel Program is a collaborative effort:

- Volunteer teen panelists and adult resolution coaches
- Woodbury County Juvenile Department
- Juvenile Court Services
- Local Law enforcement
- County Attorney's Office
- Juvenile Court Judges
- Sioux City Community School District
- Siouxland District Health

Local governments, businesses, and service organizations also give the program invaluable support. All parts of the community benefit when the panel works well.

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