

Cooley Law School's Grand Rapids Campus Pro Bono Month Event

On October 23, 2009, at 9:00 a.m., the first hearing of a Grand Rapids Teen Court will be held at the Law Center at the Thomas M. Cooley Law School's Grand Rapids campus. Teen Court is a pilot project of the non-profit Carter-Alexander Institute, which is working in conjunction with Cooley Law School on the project.

Teen Court is a diversion program for first time youthful misdemeanor offenders between the ages of 11 and 16. Through an agreement with the Kent County Prosecutor's Office, families of youthful offenders can opt to avoid the traditional criminal justice system by agreeing to participate in Teen Court. The participants must agree to remain in school, attend street law workshops, complete community service, apologize to any victims, and attend a hearing at which a jury of their peers (local high school students) will deliver a disposition that often includes additional community service, restitution, and other forms of restorative justice.

The project has received support from local bench, prosecutor's office, and probation department in Kent County, and local leaders have welcomed the effort to reduce juvenile recidivism. Cooley faculty will serve as volunteer judges along with local attorneys and judges. Cooley students will serve as Respondents' and victims' advocates, hearing observers, and as jury monitors during jury deliberations. They will also help the Respondents complete their required orders for the Teen Court diversion from prosecution. Many of them may also serve as academic mentors for the students and establish relationships with the teenagers that continue beyond Teen Court.

Anna Rapa, the director of the Carter-Alexander Institute, and an adjunct professor at Cooley, is leading the pilot project with the assistance of Assistant Dean Tracey Brame, Adjunct Professor Mike Dunn, and students Audrey Codera and Ebony Holden. They have worked closely with the Teen Court program in Lansing, MI, which has operated for years in conjunction with the Ingham County Prosecutor's Office. Student Ebony Holden is working with Lansing Teen Court to develop a Street Law Curriculum and is also recruiting and training Cooley law students to teach it. The program participants must attend a certain number of street law sessions. Student Audrey Codera has a non-profit management background and is helping with marketing materials and standard operating procedures. In the Grand Rapids project, Cooley Law School students will teach the Street Law instruction.

Cooley has been instrumental in implementing the program, and in providing office space, student support, and numerous other in-kind donations.

Hearings will be held once every month through the spring. The pilot project participants hope to have a successful year and obtain funding for a long-term project.

Thomas Cooley Law School embraces its responsibility to the students and communities it serves. In 2008, Cooley programs provided 169,134 hours of free legal service to the people and institutions surrounding its campuses and around the world through its legal

clinics and 18 pro bono programs. At an average cost of \$150 per hour for legal help, this legal assistance is worth over \$25 million. Of those hours, 69,651 were provided to those who cannot afford to pay for the services, reflecting a pro bono value to the indigent of over \$10 million.