

**FAST FACTS:**

- ◆ Teen Court relies upon the positive nature of peer pressure.
- ◆ Each Teen Court defendant is required to admit responsibility for his or her actions prior to the Teen Court proceeding.
- ◆ Failure to comply with the sentence may result in formal charges being brought against the defendant.

# Teen Court

## Innovations in District Court

By Judge Robert Bondy and  
Judge Dennis N. Powers

**T**een Court is a juvenile diversion program aimed at keeping juveniles out of the court system. The 52-1 District Court is proud to have been selected as one of the three participating courts in Oakland County for this pilot program. The court, along with the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office, has developed this youth-oriented program and has had great success with it.

In this program, an individual teen defendant is informally charged with a crime and brought to the court to be tried by his or her peers who serve as the prosecutor, defense advocate, and jury in the case. The program is designed around the philosophy that a jury of one's peers is more influential in addressing behavioral prob-

lems than any other method. The concept is to utilize peer pressure to create positive actions out of negative situations. Teen Court relies upon the positive nature of peer pressure to address the problem at hand and deter defendants from becoming repeat offenders. In Teen Court proceedings, strict confidentiality is required. Everyone in the courtroom takes an oath of confidentiality to ensure that the rights and privacy of the defendant are maintained.

The offenses that may be resolved in Teen Court vary at each session. Some of the offenses include alcohol/drug offenses, disorderly conduct, curfew violations, harassment, minor assault, vandalism, retail fraud, illegal entry, and traffic offenses.



recommendation to the judge. If the judge feels the sentence is appropriate, the defendant is ordered to comply. The Oakland County Prosecutor's Office serves as the probation officer, ensuring compliance with the sentence. Some of the sentencing options include Teen Court jury duty, oral/written apologies, curfew, community service, random drug screening, restitution, and in some cases, counseling. Failure to comply with the sentence may result in formal charges being brought against the defendant.

The goal of the Teen Court program is for all the participants to come away with a positive feeling about Teen Court and their responsibility to the community. The teen "attorneys" and jury learn something about the law and the court system while being given a chance to be active players in a very important process. The defendants have to address their inappropriate behavior before their peers and parents, and are thankful for their chance to resolve the matter through Teen Court without having to go through the juvenile court system. Ideally, these young people will think twice about making decisions that could affect their lives and others negatively.

The benefits of this Teen Court program are numerous. As a result of this early intervention, Teen Court can cut down the crime rate of teenagers as they learn to assume responsibility and be accountable for their actions, and for first-time offenders, the individual's juvenile record is wiped clean. Defendants must interact with their parents and guardians, who are required to be involved in the process. The young participants in this process become involved in the community in a meaningful way as they are allowed to actively learn and participate in a civic activity that benefits the community as a whole.

Statistics have shown that communities using Teen Court as a part of their youth crime prevention program consistently report that 90 percent or more of the defendants who complete the sentence are never re-arrested. This benefit itself proves that the Teen Court process works for the juveniles completing the program by drastically reducing the percentage of these young people who will be arrested for future crimes. As a result, the community at large benefits as these youths, whose lives have been affected in a positive way by their experience with Teen Court, become productive citizens. ♦

*52nd District Court Judge Robert M. Bondy has been a member of the State Bar of Michigan since 1985. Before becoming a judge, he helped create the 52nd District Court's Small Claims Mediation Program, was involved in the "Day of Court in School" Program, served as a sobriety court board member, and participated in the District Court Town Hall Meeting Program. Judge Bondy is a long-time member of the Milford Rotary Club and Knights of Columbus.*

*Hon. Dennis N. Powers was appointed to the 1st Division of the 52nd District Court on June 1, 1998, and then began a two-year term as presiding judge on January 1, 2000. Prior to Judge Powers' appointment to the district court bench, he served as a commissioner for Oakland County from 1992 through January of 1998. Judge Powers is an active community member and is a past president of the Huron Valley Chamber of Commerce.*

During a session of Teen Court, the responsible juvenile appears before a jury of his or her peers and is represented by a teen "defense attorney." A teen "prosecuting attorney" prosecutes the case. Adult attorneys mentor these teen "attorneys" throughout the proceedings, while Judge Powers and Judge Bondy serve as judges.

Each Teen Court defendant is required to admit responsibility for his or her actions prior to the Teen Court proceeding and to have a parent(s) present during each step of the proceedings. The teen "attorneys" make an opening statement; witnesses are questioned and cross-examined, ending with the jury being given an opportunity to ask questions. The jury deliberates and makes a sentencing