

Youth Justice Connection

YOUTH AID PANELS: PROMISING PRACTICES IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

Lancaster County employs many innovative methods of dealing with crime; drug court, mental health court, an evening reporting center, and local organizations that offer mediation or victim-offender reconciliation, to name a few. One approach to juvenile justice which reduces recidivism and adds other benefits is the youth aid panel (YAP), used in communities in our county to provide alternatives to prosecution for adolescent first-time misdemeanor and summary offenders.



Youth aid panels are comprised of specially trained volunteer panelists from the community and are sponsored by local police departments and the Lancaster County district attorney's office. They are based on Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ) principles, incorporated into Pennsylvania's Juvenile Act in 1995, which focus on community protection, offender accountability, and offender competency development.

The goal of this diversion program is for the offender to take responsibility for his or her actions and to understand what effect the crime has had on the victim and the community as a whole. After local police refer young offenders, YAP panelists meet confidentially with the youth and their parents, provided there is an admission of guilt and a willingness to participate and make restitution if necessary. Participants can opt out of the YAP process at any time.

Panelists convene privately to create the resolution, a program of community service, financial restitution or education which the offender must enter into a contract to complete. Upon completion, the panel would recommend that no criminal record be kept for the offense, and if not completed, the case would be referred back to the local police department for prosecution.

The benefits of youth aid panels are many. Costly, possibly adversarial court proceedings are replaced by panel interviews where discussion can take place between the youth, family, and YAP volunteers. In this setting, panelists can express that both caring and resources exist in the community, and can impress upon the offender the damage done by the crime and the hope that he or she can be more accountable in the future.

Low recidivism rates and restitution to victims also top the list of benefits, and make youth aid panels an important feature of a truly liveable community.

Lancaster County has 25 youth aid panels, four of which are in Lancaster City, and an additional panel forming in Lancaster Township.

CHERYL LUDWIG: A LOCAL FACE OF JUVENILE JUSTICE

When you picture someone who represents the juvenile justice system, the image of a public schoolteacher doesn't immediately come to mind. But since youth aid panels are an arm of this system, and are staffed with volunteers from all walks of life, this explains how Cheryl Ludwig, schoolteacher and long-time panelist, became the Lancaster County Youth Aid Panel coordinator and for many youth committing first-time, non-violent offenses, the face of justice and second chances.

Cheryl went through training and began volunteering on a youth aid panel (YAP) in 1999. Her children were leaving for college, and she wanted to find a way to stay connected with teens. She added the Lancaster County YAP assistant coordinator position to her schedule in 2006, and left her original panel in 2008 to become the county coordinator, all the while teaching full-time.

As coordinator, Cheryl is the liaison between the 25 Lancaster County panels and their sponsor, the county district attorney's office. D.A. Craig Stedman, as well as the county commissioners, are very supportive of the program, as is A.D.A. Rebecca Franz, who directly oversees panels county-wide and manages the coordinator. Each panel is also under the supervision of its local police department, and generally includes a liaison officer who refers cases that pass a police screening process.

Although her original goal was to work with adolescents, Cheryl cannot say enough about the quality of the adult volunteer panelists she now supports. "Our volunteers are committed to the youth in their communities, to connecting them to help and resources, and they work really hard to achieve this. Not only is this (involvement with a YAP) an opportunity we're giving kids to wipe their records clean, but also a way to let them know that there are people in their community who care about them and believe they deserve opportunities to learn from their mistakes."

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YAPs make referrals to a variety of local organizations when creating the resolution contracts for offenders, fulfilling the BARJ principal of development of competencies necessary to prevent the child from committing future crimes. Cheryl says of this component, "Our goal is for the teens to learn life skills, social skills. Even having to interact with the panel members and referral agencies teaches them how to talk to adults."

"We're not there to say (the offense) isn't a big deal," she says of the overall YAP process. "We're there to hold (youth) accountable and help them become responsible for their actions. What I enjoy most is seeing on a kid's face that they're learning that fact for themselves, that they're having an 'aha' moment."

Youth aid panelists come from all walks of life: grandparents, newlyweds, schoolteachers. They volunteer around four hours per month and undergo 24-30 hours of initial training. Contact your local police department to see if openings exist in your town or borough; be one of the faces of juvenile justice in your community.



Student Skills for Life, a program of Compass Mark, is a 12-hour group educational experience which serves as intervention for youth experimenting with alcohol or other drugs, and an alternative sentencing option for magisterial district judges. Adolescents ages 13-21 may also be referred by schools, attorneys, or parents and other caregivers.

Student Skills for Life Graduate Quotes

"This class has brought me back to reality about my drinking and currently I am six weeks sober. I realized that I don't need alcohol in my life to have a good time. I even just recently went to party and decided not to drink. I think that this was possible because I gained so much courage throughout this class. I think the best way the information was presented was when the instructors told their stories. I was able to relate and they gave us advice so we do not fall into the same situations as they did."

"My biggest problem was I wanted to be cool, but now I know that I don't have to do dumb stuff to become cool because people already like me for who I am. I would like to say thank you to everyone here for sharing your stories. I took all your stories to my heart and I will never forget them. Every time I consider doing anything your stories will be there to guide me away."

Contact Bill Paré @ (717) 299-2831 for more info on
Student Skills for Life.