

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT

UNITED YOUTH COURTS OF ALASKA

Final Report



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Most importantly, we wish to thank all of the youth court volunteers who shared their ideas with us during the Seventh Annual Statewide Youth Court Conference. This project would not have been possible had it not been for their kind and insightful participation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to a request from United Youth Courts of Alaska, we conducted an assessment of volunteer recruitment and sustainability during the Seventh Annual Statewide Youth Court Conference held in November 2003 in Anchorage, AK. We conducted three simultaneous focus groups with a total of 22 youth court volunteers to assess the advantages and disadvantages of volunteering for youth courts and the benefits and costs of continuing to volunteer for youth courts. In particular, we asked youth court volunteers about ways to improve recruitment and sustainability.

All youth court volunteers clearly enjoyed their volunteer experience and planned to continue volunteering. In order to recruit and maintain skilled volunteers, focus group participants recommended to:

- (1) Provide potential volunteers a more accurate description of youth courts,
- (2) Revise the training course,
- (3) More proactively curtail the volunteers' use of drugs and alcohol,
- (4) Enhance parental involvement in fundraising and non-court activities,
- (5) Publicize how to get involved in youth courts, and
- (6) Reward volunteers with tangible incentives.

Although none of these recommendations will surprise youth court directors, we hope that this independent evaluation will confirm their beliefs and provide justifications for progress and change. Most youth court volunteers expressed an interest helping their youth court to achieve these goals.

FINAL REPORT

United Youth Courts of Alaska (hereafter UYCA) is an organization that provides support and assistance to 14 youth courts in Alaska. These youth courts include Anchorage, Delta Junction, Fairbanks, Juneau, Kake, Kenai/Homer, Ketchikan, Kodiak, Kotzebue, Nome, Mat-Su, Sitka, Valdez, and Wrangell. Youth courts are specialized pre-adjudication programs that divert first-time non-violent juvenile offenders away from the formal juvenile justice system. By offering an alternative to the formal juvenile justice system, youth courts allow juvenile offenders to avoid the possibility of a formal adjudication. In addition to reducing labeling effects, youth courts also enhance peer justice, procedural justice, deterrence, and restorative justice in the process of juvenile justice.

More specifically, youth courts allow first-time non-violent juvenile offenders to be informally sentenced by their peers. Prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges are all youth volunteers who have received special training to informally adjudicate other juveniles. By relying on the model of peer justice, it is believed that pro-social peers have a greater impact than adults on the pro-social development of youthful offenders. Most defendants will plea guilty and their sentences will emphasize the concepts of restorative justice. As part of their informal adjustment, defendants will typically be required to perform community service, write an essay describing the harm that they have caused to victims, parents, and society, and attend classes (e.g., anti-shoplifting classes).

For further information on youth courts in Alaska, you should consult the UYCA webpage at <http://www.alaskayouthcourt.org> and for further information on youth courts in general, you should consult the National Youth Court Center webpage at <http://www.youthcourt.net>.

In the most scientific outcome evaluation of the Anchorage Youth Court, Butts et al. (2002) compared 114 juveniles sentenced through Anchorage Youth Court from September 2000 to July 2001 to 114 randomly selected comparable juveniles from 1995 who were not sentenced through Anchorage Youth Court. These 228 youths were then tracked for six months to observe new delinquency referrals to the Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice. Results showed that only 6% of youths sentenced through Anchorage Youth Court recidivated while 23% of comparable youths not sentenced through Anchorage Youth Court recidivated. Stated differently, Anchorage Youth Court reduced the percentage of youths who recidivated by 74%. The Anchorage Youth Court produced such an unusually large reduction in recidivism that there is no doubt it should be considered a *model program* in Anchorage.

NEED FOR SUCCESSFUL RECRUITMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

The effectiveness of a youth court, however, is clearly dependent upon its ability to recruit and maintain volunteers. Youth courts are most effective when volunteers are well qualified, well trained, and well experienced. Low recruitment or sustainability will lower the qualifications, training, and experience of the volunteers thereby lowering the effectiveness of youth courts. Furthermore, low recruitment or sustainability will lower the quality of one's volunteer experience

(i.e., by increasing demands and fatigue) thereby further lowering recruitment and sustainability. Finally, low recruitment and sustainability will force executive directors and staff to focus their limited resources on further recruitment efforts rather than on sustainability. In the end, youth courts cannot successfully operate when recruitment or sustainability are low. Stated differently, youth courts must successfully recruit volunteers and successfully maintain their volunteers in order to maximize their effectiveness.

EVALUATION DESIGN

The purpose of this evaluation was to assess how youth courts in Alaska could improve recruitment and sustainability. To achieve this goal, we conducted three simultaneous focus groups (with a total of 22 youth court volunteers) at the conclusion of the Seventh Annual Statewide Youth Court Conference, on Saturday November 8, 2003, from 7:30AM to 9:00AM at the Dimond Center Hotel. Each focus group was conducted by one researcher. The researcher acted as a facilitator and guided the discussion by asking a series of open-ended questions about the youths' personal experiences with youth courts, including experiences with recruitment, funding, sustainability, and ethics (see Appendix for focus group questions). Each researcher was assisted by one note-taker responsible for keeping detailed notes and one assistant responsible for summarizing key points on a flipchart.

All focus groups were conducted in private rooms and the youths were reassured of the confidentiality of their answers. All youths had previously signed an assent form and, if youths were less than 18 years of age, one of their

legal guardians had previously signed a consent form (see Appendix for both forms). Participation in focus groups was completely voluntary and youths were free to leave at any time (none did). At the conclusion of the focus groups, youths were compensated for their participation with 15 dollars.

LIMITATIONS

An important limitation to this study is that we obtained information on the causes of volunteer attrition from volunteers who were still actively involved in youth court. A different approach would have been to conduct focus groups with youths who volunteered for youth court for only a brief period of time. The youths in our focus groups, however, were well informed about the causes of volunteer attrition. As such, we see no reason to question the veracity or usefulness of their suggestions. At the very least, following these suggestions will ensure that these active volunteers remain active.

Furthermore, this is an evaluation of youth courts throughout the State of Alaska. To protect the confidentiality of youths' answers, we do not provide site-specific results or recommendations. As a consequence, evaluation results and recommendations may not apply to all youth courts.

EVALUATION RESULTS

We began our focus groups by asking participants why they had originally decided to volunteer for youth court. Youths generally indicated a strong interest in juvenile justice which had developed from peer, family, and media influences. More specifically, participants joined youth court because their peers either came

into contact with the formal juvenile justice system or were already volunteering with youth courts. Some youths decided to join because their parents were employed by the criminal justice system. Others were convinced by their parents that it would be a good idea, particularly to prepare for college applications. Finally, there is no doubt that recent television shows have stimulated youths' interest in the justice system. Unfortunately, many of these youths became disillusioned once they realized that youth courts were not like television shows. A persistent issue that arose in all focus groups is that youths' perceptions of youth court were generally inaccurate. As a result, many youths become disenchanted with their volunteer experience and decide to leave youth courts. In order to successfully recruit and maintain volunteers, youth courts should provide each potential volunteer with a better understanding of youth courts.

The youths that participated in our focus groups were all enthusiastic about volunteering for youth courts. In particular, they enjoyed having the ability to give first-time offenders a second chance and promoting community service while doing so. Furthermore, they all recognized that participation in youth courts tremendously improved their social and public speaking skills. Nonetheless, there were two aspects of youth courts that participants identified as problematic – the training course and ethical violations.

Focus group participants unanimously agreed that the training course should be revised. First, youths complained that the course was not directly relevant to the types of cases that they would hear. For example, youths complained that discussions of criminal intent were focused on murder, a charge that clearly would never appear in youth courts. Unfortunately, irrelevant

examples (e.g., murder) in the training course furthered the youths' misconceptions about youth courts. Second, and partly as a result of irrelevant examples, many youths complained that they had no idea what youth courts were about until they participated on real cases. Finally, some youths had not participated in mock cases as part of their training session and others complained that mock cases occurred too late in the training. Overall, it is clear that the training course should be revised. In doing so, revisions should (1) eliminate irrelevant examples and (2) ensure that all youths participate in mock cases throughout the training course. By achieving these two goals, misconceptions about youth courts should be greatly reduced. By reducing such misconceptions, volunteer sustainability should improve.

Focus group participants also believed that ethical violations were a substantial problem. The youths seemed confident, however, that major ethical violations were rare and were appropriately handled. They were more troubled by the less severe but substantially more frequent violation of alcohol and drug use. Youth court volunteers were deeply troubled by having judges who use alcohol and drugs ruling on alcohol cases. They clearly indicated that the peer justice model could not possibly function in the presence of such hypocrisy. When asked about ways to curtail such ethical violations, youths suggested that youth courts should be more vigilant and should use tougher penalties for violators. Since volunteers already know that alcohol and drug use are illegal, focus group participants did not believe that additional training would be beneficial. Instead, youths believed that more should be done to monitor the volunteers' use of alcohol and drugs and that alcohol and drug users should be

more strictly punished (e.g., parental notifications and youth court suspensions). An interesting idea that emerged from some discussions was to create a youth supreme court to deal with such cases. In such a court, youth court volunteers who have misbehaved would be judged by volunteers who have not.

Youths were also displeased by the decorum that some volunteers displayed in the courtroom. Specific examples included inappropriate dress and conduct (e.g., talking and giggling in the courtroom, being disruptive during court proceedings, wearing belly shirts and cut jeans). Most youths believed that inappropriate dress and conduct were caused by a lack of understanding. As such, most participants agreed that the training course should emphasize appropriate dress code and courtroom behavior to a greater extent.

As part of our focus groups, we also asked youths about how they handle similar cases differently. There was little consensus on whether this was a problem or not. Many youths indicated that it was relatively easy to handle each case differently by focusing on mitigating and aggravating factors that are unique to each case. At the same time, youth court volunteers expressed a strong interest in having a more diversified set of cases including more severe cases. Unfortunately, there is little that youth courts can do to increase the variety or severity of cases that are diverted to them.

Although parents cannot be in court, youths were asked if they would like to see parents more involved. All youths wanted greater parental involvement, but exclusively for fundraising efforts and non-court activities such as parties and picnics. Youths complained that parents and other adults often take control of meetings. Youths wanted a greater role in youth court meetings and wished not

to be excluded from important discussions. All youths understood the need for fundraising but generally felt unqualified to assist in these efforts and uninterested in doing so. Youths also expressed an interest in having more non-court activities such as picnics and parties. They strongly believed that such activities would enhance the volunteer experience, thereby ensuring volunteer sustainability. Given that youths expressed a strong interest for additional non-court activities and their desire to keep parents out of court, a good role for parents would be to organize more non-court activities.

Finally, youths were asked about ways to improve the recruitment and sustainability of volunteers. Though youths believed that youth courts are well known in their communities, they also believed that few youths actually know how to get involved. To inform youths about how to get involved, focus group participants suggested that publicity about youth courts should more specifically describe how youths can get involved. Focus group participants understood their role in promoting youth courts and in explaining to their peers how to get involved. In addition, youths believed that additional publicity in the media and schools would be worthwhile.

As aforementioned, it is then important to provide potential volunteers with a clear understanding of what their roles and responsibilities will be. Although youths have a general understanding of youth courts, a more precise understanding is necessary for volunteer sustainability. Too many youths will quit volunteering once they realize that youth court is not what they expected it to be. To enhance the potential volunteers' understanding of youth court, it would be desirable to offer additional mock cases, particularly early in their training.

To summarize, focus group participants believed that youth courts can more clearly publicize how youths can get involved (rather than simply publicizing youth courts). In addition, youth courts should provide a better and more accurate description of youth courts before potential volunteers begin the training course. Achieving these goals should enhance volunteer sustainability.

Focus group participants also thought it was important to increase tangible incentives to enhance volunteer sustainability. More specifically, they thought it was important to clearly base tangible incentives on the number of hours each youth has volunteered. A reward system should be developed so that the number and quality of rewards increase as youths' involvement in youth courts increases. Tangible rewards identified by youths as valuable included sweatshirts, jackets, presidential awards, gavels, and plaques. These rewards should be more clearly linked to the number of hours each youth has volunteered than they currently are. Finally, youths believed that volunteer sustainability could be improved by adding fun non-court activities such as parties and picnics. Again, the youths believed that this was an important area where parents could get involved.

The final problem that youths identified was that it is often difficult and cumbersome to obtain school credit for volunteering with youth courts. Youths expressed frustration caused by a lengthy and cumbersome process. Formalizing and standardizing the process of obtaining school credit would be useful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the youths' answers during our focus groups, the research team suggests six recommendations to improve volunteer recruitment and sustainability. First, youth courts should provide potential volunteers a more accurate description of youth courts. Many volunteers enter youth courts with grave misconceptions. As a result, they become disenchanted with youth courts once they realize what youth courts really do. To eliminate this problem, the training course should be revised to exclude irrelevant examples and mock cases should occur throughout the training course, particularly at the beginning.

Second, the training course should be revised. As aforementioned, it should be revised to give potential volunteers a more precise understanding of youth courts and to increase mock cases, especially at the beginning of the training course. In addition, the training course should be revised to exclude irrelevant examples and to emphasize appropriate dress and conduct in court. Excluding irrelevant examples should also provide potential volunteers a more realistic description of youth courts.

Third, youth courts should do more to address ethical violations, particularly ones involving drug and alcohol use. Though it is beyond the scope of this evaluation to address this problem, youth courts should be more proactive in detecting and responding to volunteers' use of alcohol and drugs. The model of peer justice can only work if youth court defendants are informally adjudicated by pro-social role models. The training course may need to emphasize that youth court volunteers must behave as pro-social role models and that any

violation will be severely punished. Again, the idea of creating a youth supreme court is an interesting one that may deserve some consideration.

Fourth, parental involvement should be enhanced, particularly for fundraising efforts and planning non-court activities. Picnics and parties are important and fun incentives to volunteers. Asking parents to be more proactive in the planning of these events would enhance the quality of the youths' volunteer experience. Parents could also set up field trips to other justice agencies. Most youths expressed an interest in visiting other justice agencies. At the same time, parental involvement in meetings should be diminished to allow youths to have a greater role and impact in these meetings.

Fifth, volunteer recruitment should be assisted by additional publicity by current volunteers and in the media and schools. This additional publicity should more precisely describe youth courts and, more importantly, should clearly describe how youths can get involved in youth courts. Though most volunteers believed that youth courts are well-known, few volunteers believed that youths actually know how to get involved. In addition, it is likely that streamlining the process of obtaining school credit may assist volunteer recruitment.

Sixth, the number and quality of tangible incentives to promote volunteering should be increased. In addition, tangible incentives should be more clearly tied to the number of hours each youth volunteers. Doing so would improve the youths' satisfaction with youth courts thereby ensuring volunteer sustainability.

CONCLUSION

- To improve volunteer recruitment and sustainability, youth courts should:
- (1) Provide potential volunteers a more accurate description of youth courts,
 - (2) Revise the training course,
 - (3) More proactively curtail the volunteers' use of drugs and alcohol,
 - (4) Enhance parental involvement in fundraising and non-court activities,
 - (5) Publicize how to get involved in youth courts, and
 - (6) Reward volunteers with tangible incentives.

EVALUATION RESOURCES

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APPENDIX A

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

EVALUATION OF UNITED YOUTH COURTS OF AK Parental Consent Form

RESEARCHER:

André B. Rosay, Ph.D.
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3211 Providence Drive
Anchorage, AK 99508
(907) 786-1821

DESCRIPTION:

I am interested in interviewing your child to learn more about why she or he joined youth courts and why she or he has decided to stay involved with youth courts. In addition, I am interested in learning about your child's thoughts and suggestions for enhancing the success of youth courts, for making the volunteer experience in youth court more meaningful, and for securing the sustainability of youth courts throughout the State of Alaska. The interviews will be conducted by trained students from the Justice Center at the University of Alaska Anchorage, under my supervision. Each interviewer will interview youth court participants in groups of 10. The interview will last approximately one hour and will occur during the Annual United Youth Courts of Alaska conference in November. Each interviewer will also take notes.

To ensure that your child's participation is completely voluntary and to ensure that she or he has your consent to participate, I am asking for two indications of consent. First, you are asked to read this consent form and to discuss it with your child. Only after you both understand its contents, I am asking you to sign this consent form thereby certifying that you are the legal guardian of your child and consenting to his/her participation in this study. Second, your child will be asked to read an assent form. This form will explain -- in language that your child will understand -- the study, its risks and benefits, and its voluntary nature. I have asked your child to discuss the assent form with you and, after you both understand its contents, to write his or her name on the form thereby consenting to participate.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Neither your name nor your child's name will be recorded in the interviewer's notes. Your name and your child's name will only be included on this consent form and your child's assent form. Both forms will be kept in a locked file that is only accessible to me. There will be no way to link your child's answers to his or her assent form or to your consent form. Any information from this study that is published or otherwise disseminated will not identify you or your child by name. Your child's answers and comments will remain completely confidential.

BENEFITS:

There will be no direct benefit to you or your child from his or her participation in this study. The results of this study will only benefit United Youth Courts of Alaska by enhancing their sustainability.

RISKS:

It is possible that the discussion of thoughts in a group situation may make your child nervous or uncomfortable. Your child will not be asked directly to answer any question. There are no other risks to you or your child.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF PARTICIPATION:

Your child's participation in this study and your consent for his or her participation is completely voluntary. If you do not wish your child to participate or your child does not wish to participate, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to you or your child which you are otherwise entitled. In other words, both you and your child are free to make their own choice about being in this study or not. In addition, your child may quit at any time without penalty. Your child will be able to leave the interview at any time without our permission.

CONTACT:

If you have any questions about this research, please contact the researcher at the phone number listed above or Krista Scully, Executive Director of United Youth Courts of Alaska at 907-278-1165.

SIGNATURE:

Your signature below means that you have freely agreed to let your child participate in this research study. You should consent only if you have read this form, discussed it with your child, and you both understand its contents. If you have any questions pertaining to the research, your child's rights, or your right as a parent, you may contact André Rosay whose phone number is (907) 786-1821, or the Office of Academic Affairs at (907) 786-1921.

Your signature certifies that you are the **legal guardian of:**

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←

_____ and that you have the legal authority to consent to his/her participation in this study. You hereby grant consent for him/her to participate in this study.

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←

Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

YOUTH ASSENT FORM

JUSTICE CENTER
University of Alaska Anchorage
3211 Providence Drive
Anchorage, AK 99508

EVALUATION OF UNITED YOUTH COURTS OF AK Youth Assent Form

My name is André Rosay. I am a professor at the Justice Center at the University of Alaska Anchorage. I am asking you to participate in a research study because we are trying to learn more about youth courts in Alaska. We want to know how we can make youth courts better, by exploring the reasons why you joined a youth court and why you are still participating in youth court. We also want to know your ideas for making youth courts better.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed in a group with nine other youth court participants like you. The interviewer will be an adult that will ask the group about its thoughts for making youth courts better. The interviewer will also take notes to remember these thoughts. If you don't have any thoughts about a particular question or if you don't want to share your thoughts, that's OK. Only those who would like to share their thoughts will be asked to do so. The interview will last about one hour.

There are very few risks that may result from your participation. Sometimes, you may feel a little bit nervous or embarrassed to speak in a group. Remember that you don't have to speak if it makes you nervous or uncomfortable. There are also no benefits to you directly from your participation. Only youth courts will benefit from your participation.

Please talk this over with your parents before you decide whether or not to participate. We will also ask your parents to give their permission for you to take part in this study. But even if your parents say "yes" you can still decide not to do this. If you don't want to be in this study, you don't have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop. If you want to leave, you can do that at any time. You do not need our permission to leave.

You can ask any questions that you have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call me at 907-786-1821 or send me an e-mail at afabr@uaa.alaska.edu.

Writing your name at the bottom means that you talked to your parents about this study and that you both understand what the study is about. It also means that you agree to be in this study. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form.

Your Name

Date

APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- (1) Why did you join Youth Court?
 - a. Which part of youth court do you like? Why?
 - b. Which part of youth court do you not like? Why?
 - c. How can we make the volunteer experience more enjoyable?
- (2) Many of the cases that go to youth court are similar to one another. How do you handle each one differently? How can youth courts help you handle each one differently?
- (3) Though parents cannot be in court, they could support youth court in other ways. Would you like to see parents get more involved?
 - a. If NO, why not?
 - b. If YES, how?
- (4) Do you feel there is a problem with ethics in Youth Court
 - a. What violations are the most frequent and easiest?
 - b. What can youth courts do to reduce problems with ethics?
- (5) How can we get more volunteers?
- (6) What kinds of incentives can be used to maintain volunteers?

Follow-up questions included:

- (1) How can we improve the training course?
- (2) How can we reduce the number of inactive volunteers?