

Kids help kids in innovative program

Peers decide punishment

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EDMONTON - It's an out-of-court sentencing process for young offenders unlike anything else in the world.

Edmonton's Youth Restorative Action Project (YRAP) is made up of a group of young people -- ranging from honours students to reformed young criminals -- who sit down with young offenders to decide their punishment.

Adults don't get a vote in the process.

"It's kids helping kids," said Alberta Solicitor General Heather Forsyth, a staunch advocate of YRAP sentencing.

She said she's not worried that some of the volunteer youth panellists have criminal backgrounds. Their past experiences only aid the decision-making process.

"Who do you relate to more than your own peer group?"

In the fall, Forsyth met YRAP's 40 youth volunteers, aged 12 to 25, for the first time over pizza.

"They're wonderful, magnificent, entertaining, honest kids," she said. "I'm very proud of this youth group."

YRAP has heard 27 cases since it began operating in March 2001, although it was only sanctioned by the province last May. Plans are underway to form a second group in Whitecourt.

There are 105 other youth justice committees operating in Alberta, but they all involve adult volunteers.

The program's success has sparked inquiries from England, South Africa and Australia, said Mark Cherrington, a youth court worker with Edmonton's Youth Criminal Defence Office.

The law office helped launch the program with the help of ihuman Youth Society and the University of Alberta's campus radio station, CJSR.

Cherrington said a young girl who arrived in Edmonton after fleeing from violence in her home of Serbia came to him with an idea to develop a group that would deal with youth and racism.

Her idea inspired YRAP, and at first, the group only handled young offender cases for race-related crimes. The group's first co-ordinator, a 16-year-old girl living on the streets, later expanded the mandate to include other social issues: homelessness, addiction, sexual abuse, mental health and prostitution.

Victims and parents are allowed to sit in on the program's conference discussions. But it's the youth who determine the punishment.

A judge must formally agree to the sentences in court, and most of them do, said Cherrington. The sentences fall in line with what the courts would hand down, usually probation and community service.

Sometimes, the sentence is tougher than the courts. Most often, it's more creative.

As a way to work off community service hours, the program ordered one young man, who started a fight over a racial slur, to record a song about racism for CJSR. It decided another boy with an interest in film should make a short video about shoplifting.

Most recently, the group ruled a teen who trashed a Journal reporter's car would write an essay about drug use for the newspaper.

"They have a unique perspective," Judge Janet Franklin said. The assistant chief judge for the provincial court's family and youth division said she strongly supports the group and trusts their judgments.

Youth Crown prosecutor Robert Beck said YRAP has surprised and impressed him with its ideas.

Program members sit down for one to three hours talking with young offenders about their crimes, their lives and what they need to try to change. Many volunteers with criminal backgrounds share their own experiences.

"When it's all adults, you feel intimidated," said one reformed young offender who volunteers with the program. "When it's your own peers, you can talk."

The numbers show the program works, Cherrington said. Only two of the 27 offenders YRAP has sentenced have reoffended.

Part of the success is also due to the "positive shaming" offenders go through when their victims agree to meet them, he said. "These kids don't understand the harm they've done with a victim impact statement or by getting talked down to by a judge. The only way they learn is to look in the eyes of the person they've hurt."

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YRAP

- Edmonton's Youth Restorative Action Project is the only youth justice committee in the world made up of young people instead of adults.
- Youths aged 12 to 24 volunteer to sit down with young offenders and determine their punishments.
- Many of the volunteers are reformed young offenders or recovering drug addicts. Some are activists and honours students.
- The sentences fall in line with what the courts would hand down with a creative twist, such as giving a speech at a school or writing a song.
- One young offender was recently ordered to write an essay for The Journal about drug use.

Youth Sentencing. Ran with fact box "Yrap", which has been appended to this story.