

Columbia County Juvenile Probation

Youth Aid Panel

Columbia County Juvenile Probation initiated the development of a Youth Aid Panel, a diversionary program, during 2003. The purpose of the program is two-fold. It provides the juvenile court and the minor judiciary with an alternative to entry into the formal juvenile court system by offering a community panel of volunteers to develop a plan to address the youthful offender's behavior with no "official" record being incurred. Secondly, it provides for community involvement in the juvenile justice process. The youthful offender's participation in the Youth Aid Panel process is strictly voluntarily.

The Panel operates in an informal and friendly manner. A Panel meeting is not an adversarial process and representation by a lawyer is unnecessary. Panel members will discuss with the juvenile, as well as with their parent(s), the nature of the offense and help in finding workable resolutions to the issue at hand. The Panel is not empowered to act as judge or jury in deciding guilt or innocence. Therefore, if the juvenile intends to deny involvement in this incident, Panel involvement is not appropriate and the case would be processed through the Court system.

The Panel develops a contract for the juvenile to complete which addresses the offense with accountability sanctions which may include community service, restitution, apology letters, essays and special projects or assignments depending on the situation and juvenile. The juvenile will be given anywhere from one to six months to complete the contract and will have a monitor from the Panel who contacts them by phone to check on their progress. They will be scheduled for an exit interview to present to the Panel their accomplishments in fulfilling the contract conditions.

The juvenile may at any time and for any reason end the Panel process and exercise the right to have their matter referred to Juvenile or District Court. If the juvenile fulfills the obligations, no charges will be referred to the Court, and no formal record will exist for the incident. However, if the obligations are not met, the charges will be referred to the justice system for disposition.

Volunteers are asked to give a one-year commitment to the panel and are trained by court personnel prior to starting the process. Many of our panel members have been involved for several years and have been vital in the success of the program which has impacted our youth and communities. Persons interested in becoming a volunteer on the panel are welcome to contact the juvenile probation office for more information at 570-389-5684.