



## PLACER COUNTY PEER COURT

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### The Placer County Peer Court

In 1991 Placer County officials were faced with the fact that the number of juvenile crime cases was over 1500. There were increasing incidents of “low-level” infractions, misdemeanors and some felonies that included petty theft, shoplifting, possession of drugs and alcohol, drunk and disorderly behavior, and more cases involving weapons. A coalition of county department heads decided to do something to address these increasing numbers and reverse the trend. The coalition, the Special Multi-Administration and Resource Team, “S.M.A.R.T”, is composed of key representatives from various departments including Probation, Welfare, Mental Health, Juvenile Court, and the school system who work together to address the issues that revolve around children. Judge J. Richard Couzens, presiding Juvenile Court Judge at the time, knew of a program in Eureka called Teen Court that seemed to be working. A group visited and studied the Humboldt program, liked it, and decided to give it a try in Placer County.

In addition to the court, the group wanted to add an information component so that all students would have the opportunity to learn about the juvenile justice system and how it works. Karen Green, a former high school counselor, was hired as the Peer Court Coordinator. Her first priority was to establish a curriculum and work with the schools on appropriate implementation that would focus on prevention.

In November of 1991, Mrs. Green conducted a survey of county assistant high school principals. The survey indicated that most high school students who were on probation were in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. The high schools were very receptive to a curriculum related to juvenile rights and responsibilities. A two-week curriculum was written and piloted at Placer High School in 1992. The program has expanded each year and during the 2006-2007 school year was taught in 15 of the county’s high schools, at the freshman level in most cases and three middle or junior high schools. Lessons are based on the Juvenile Justice Handbook and a series of discussions led by different speakers. Probation Officers, Judges, District Attorneys, Public Defenders, Sheriff’s officers, local Police officers, felons and others who are willing to share their stories, and the Peer Court Coordinator go into classrooms to provide information and answer questions. The Handbook is prepared by the Peer Court Board of Directors and serves as a guide for current laws that may affect juveniles. High school teachers are inserviced on the unit.

The importance of giving teen’s accurate and forthright information on their rights and responsibilities is the intent of the curriculum piece. Allowing students to ask the people who know about drugs, gangs, school attendance, parent rights, and other pertinent topics is critical in assisting youth to make good decisions about their behavior and to know that there are consequences should they choose otherwise.

The first Peer Court session was held in April 1992. Peer Court is now held four times a month on Tuesday evenings – the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday at the Auburn Historic Courthouse and the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday at the Roseville Courthouse. Students assume the roles of clerk, bailiff and jurors. Some jury members are past defendants since a part of every sentence is a minimum of two times on jury duty. The attorneys representing the prosecution and the defense are also teens who have undergone some training in how to read police reports, present arguments and generally present a case before a judge and jury. Over 65 Placer County attorneys are donating their time to assist the teen attorneys in their case preparation and come to court on the evening their teen is scheduled to appear.

Peer Court juries have several options for sentencing. The jury is also free to come up with other requirements. Sentence options can include any of the following:

- Graffiti Abatement
- Ride Along with Law Enforcement
- Impose a Curfew
- Parenting Classes
- Mediation
- Face-to-Face Apology
- Fines
- Restitutions
- Essay (Jury selects topic)
- Jail Tour
- View Drug & Alcohol Films
- Attend a class:
  - Drug & Alcohol Diversion
  - Theft Education
  - Choices, Changes, Challenges
  - Anger Control
  - Tobacco Cessation

Every defendant must serve a minimum of two times on a jury and complete ten hours of community service. The maximum community service allowed ordered is one hundred hours. Juveniles who are referred to Peer Court through the Probation Department, local police agencies or school resource officers have admitted guilt. Peer Court is for sentencing purposes only and cases referred are first time offenders. To date Peer Court has heard over 3,000 cases. Recidivism rate is less than 3%. Placer County Peer Court now hears all tobacco, skateboarding, and curfew citations and in a project with two high schools hears truancy citations in a tribunal style court hearing.

Legislation was passed and went into effect on January 1, 1995, that gives California State Department of Education approval for the curriculum to be taught in any California public school between grades seven and twelve. Curriculum is based on the Juvenile Justice Handbook and supplemental materials.

All professionals involved with the program volunteer their time for meetings, court, case preparation and school presentations. The Peer Court Coordinator receives a salary. Funding for the project comes from participating schools dedicating some of their drug and alcohol and safe school monies, the Placer County Courts, Placer County Probation Department, the Placer County Office of Education and the Placer County Bar Association. Dollars in previous

years have come from grants out of the Office of Criminal Justice Planning, the Placer County Health and Human Services Department, the California Department of Education and the California Judicial Council's Collaborative Justice Courts Advisory Committee. At a cost of \$3,000 to \$5,000 to send a juvenile case through the regular probation and juvenile court procedures, Peer Court is saving Placer County money. The budget for fiscal year 2006-2007 is \$200,000. Approximately 5000 students were served through the school and court programs in fiscal year 2006. Peer Court handled over one third of all the juvenile citations issued in Placer County.

Placer County currently is working with several other states and several California counties as well as the California Administrative Office of the Courts to develop materials and assist counties in implementing their own Youth Courts.

In 2007, both a California Association of Youth Courts and the National Association of Youth Courts were formed. Coordinator Green and Judge Couzens served on the task force for National Association with Green being elected President Elect for 2008. Judge Couzens is the President of the California Association and Green is the Treasurer.

Placer County Peer Court representatives are available to do speaking engagements as well as workshops and in-service training for a reasonable fee. Interested persons should contact Coordinator Karen Green by mail at 671 Newcastle Road, Suite 7, Newcastle, CA 95658 or by phone at 916-663-9227. Further information including news, events and other resources are available on the Placer County Peer Court website: [www.peercourt.com](http://www.peercourt.com)