

Pittsford Youth Court a Positive Alternative

In Pittsford we are very fortunate to have both a school system that recognizes the value of community service in education and a wide range of community programs that challenge our youth to think beyond themselves. The Town of Pittsford is proud to be involved with one such program that allows teen participants to help other young people going through a pivotal point in their lives.

Pittsford Youth Court was established in 2009 through a Town initiative that brought together local school officials and youth program providers with members of the Monroe County Sheriff's Office to create an alternative option within the juvenile justice and school systems. It is part of the national Youth Court system, which currently serves over 1,200 communities nationwide.

There are many benefits to this innovative system. It enhances community safety by holding minors accountable for their actions while promoting positive peer influence and long-term behavioral change. It empowers local youth to be active in helping their community solve problems. And it offers learning opportunities for both offenders and the youth volunteers participating in the program.

Youth Court promotes restorative justice – an approach that involves having offenders take responsibility for their actions, apologize, and make amends for their misdeed. As a result, the Youth Court system has been found to be very effective at keeping kids from repeat offenses.

The program allows first-time, non-violent juvenile offenders ages 8 through 18 to appear before Youth Court rather than going through the traditional public court system. Each Pittsford Youth Court Peer Jury Panel is made up of seven high school students residing in Pittsford. All Jury Panelists participate in a 16-hour New York State sanctioned Youth Court training and sign an Oath of Confidentiality before participating in the program. The court proceedings are private and all records are kept confidential. In order to further ensure privacy for the offender, panelists are selected from a school other than where the offender attends.

Cases are referred to Pittsford Youth Court by school officials, Town Court, and the Monroe County Sheriff's office as well as by victims and parents of offenders. For instance, a store may catch a youth shoplifting but decide to have the offender held accountable via Youth Court instead of pressing charges via the police. It is a way of having youthful offenders face consequences for their actions without having to be legally prosecuted.

Some of the young people involved as Pittsford Youth Court jury panelists and Advisory Board members are graduating this year and will be leaving the program. I'd like to thank and recognize these young people, as well as past participants, for their efforts in such an important community based intervention and prevention program. I'd also like to recognize the offenders who participated in the process and worked to make amends for their wrongdoing.

Pittsford Youth Court is currently seeking referral cases. To refer a case, or for information on volunteering in the program, contact program coordinator Jill Lennox at 248-6243 or visit the Youth Court quick link on the Town's website. As always, feel free to share any comments with me at bcarpenter@townofpittsford.org or stop in and visit me at Town Hall.