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## Enumclaw kids held accountable, kept out of formal court system

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When teenagers get caught shoplifting, they are usually shuffled off to a big-city courthouse.

In Enumclaw, kids who commit low-level, first-time offenses have another option.

Depending on their crime, they and their parents or guardians can meet with the Enumclaw Community Accountability Board.

The accountability board does exactly what its name implies – it holds young people responsible for their actions, diverting them from the formal, juvenile justice system to community-based volunteers who hold them accountable for their choices and help them avoid future trouble.

In King County, diverting young people from the formal juvenile justice system to community-based citizen groups began in 1959. Enumclaw is home to one of 23 Community Accountability Boards in King County.

“A lot are kids who just made a poor choice,” said Matthew David, who serves as the area manager for the county’s Partnership for Youth Justice, a program of King County Superior Court, which authorizes the Community Accountability Boards. “The accountability board is a place for them to take responsibility.”

Community volunteers, along with a trained court adviser, make up the board. In Enumclaw, Margie is the veteran. She’s been its leader for 36 years. One of the best features about the board is the confidentiality that surrounds it. Most people don’t know it exists and most families who have been involved have never been outed.

Margie prefers her last name not be used.

“The majority of the kids we see are really good kids who just did something stupid and usually we don’t see them again,” she said.

“It’s a chance to say ‘You made a mess, now let’s clean it up and put it behind you,’” said David, who trains and screens court advisers.

Between 1975 and 2010, Enumclaw’s CAB has heard 2,632 cases. On average, since alcohol- and drug-related offenses have been removed from their duties, the group sees about 35 a year. They meet twice a month, hearing two cases an evening.

David said Enumclaw’s CAB heard more cases in 2010 than any year since 2006.

In 2010, 37 cases were referred to the committee. Of those, 57 percent were boys, 43 percent girls. Of the 31 cases in 2009, 87 percent were boys and 13 percent were girls. In addition to seeing more girls, Margie, said they are also seeing more Hispanic youth.

Shoplifting and assault were the top offenses, with shoplifting No. 1 and committed mostly by girls, Margie said.

The increase in assaults took the board a bit by surprise.

“There’s more violence,” Margie said. “Most of them at the high school.”

It may be 10 fights, she said, but they were battles serious enough to warrant a call to the police.

“For us to have it double was a real eye-opener,” she said.

They also see cases for criminal trespass, malicious mischief and stolen property, to name just a few. Offenders range in age from 12 to 17. Most cases come from the Enumclaw Police Department, although others come from King County and Pierce County sheriff’s departments and Black Diamond police.

Margie said it doesn’t matter where young people commit a crime – if they are an Enumclaw School District student, they’re seen here.

When they and their parents or guardians meet with the board, there can be a series of questions discussed like: Who was harmed by the offense? What harm was done? What do you need to do to make it right?

Options for offenders can be community service, counseling, a letter of apology, an essay or restitution.

Whatever decision is made, the youth are offered a diversion agreement, or contract; if they don’t follow through or choose not to sign, they’re off to the court system. At any time, the court system is always an option.

But, Margie and David said, going through the diversion process means they haven’t been convicted of a crime.

It’s a conference rather than a hearing, a contract rather than a sentence and a community rather than a judge.

They never set foot in the Seattle courthouse, there’s a small fee, they have no record – they can truthfully say they’ve never been convicted of a crime, David said.

“Whatever we’re doing it works,” David said, referring to the 95 percent of kids who complete diversion successfully and are not seen again. It’s completely confidential for the youth and the family. The community holds its youth accountable and it reduces court congestion. It keeps about 3,000 cases a year out of the courthouse and saves taxpayers more than \$2 million.

“I think it works,” Margie said. “It saves the court a lot of time and money.”

What the system could use is more volunteers. Anyone interested in more information can call 206-296-1131 or visit [www.kingcounty.gov/courts/superiorcourt/volunteer](http://www.kingcounty.gov/courts/superiorcourt/volunteer).