

# Clark County Juvenile Court uses community service rather than punishment, with good results

Youth participate in projects with Clark County nonprofits to fulfill community service requirement

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An intern writes a positive message in chalk outside the Clark County Juvenile Justice Center in Vancouver on Tuesday afternoon. . (Amanda Cowan/The Columbian) Photo Gallery

Clark County Juvenile Court was early to adopt a restorative justice approach that replaces punishment with a path for young offenders to make amends to society.

Founded in 2000, Juvenile Court's Restorative Community Service program is coming up on 25 years of operation. The program requires young offenders to complete between eight and 40 community service hours during their 12-month probation period by volunteering for different community projects throughout the county.

Before the restorative justice program, youth completed community service hours on work crews.

“Those were often shameful, not really at all value-based. It was more punishment,” said Christine Simonsmeier, Clark County Juvenile Court administrator. “We’re really looking at creating hope and redemption, as opposed to that older model, which was definitely a shaming model.”

The program works with 31 organizations to provide youth with community-service opportunities.

Juvenile Court serves those ages 12 to 20, but most youths are 14 and 15, Simonsmeier said. The number of youth going in the juvenile system at any given time varies. Currently, 366 youths are on probation or going through a diversion program through Juvenile Court; all are eligible to go through the restorative justice program.

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Youth who are in juvenile detention complete their community service hours after they’re released. In 2024 through June, the average time spent in the county detention was 10 days. Those who are in the diversion program perform community service in lieu of detention.

“We’re showing up and engaging with youth and families, our community and our victims in a way that not only holds all parties’ needs in balance,” Simonsmeier said, “but also enhances and creates more opportunities for what we refer to as meaningful accountability.”

#### Opportunities to serve

The program’s hallway on the second floor of the Clark County Juvenile Justice Center in downtown Vancouver has service opportunities posted on the wall. The court’s current partners include Camp Hope, Friends of Trees, Latino Community Resource Group, Salvation Army, Habitat for Humanity and 26 more.

“There’s a lot of value in taking the kids to the hallway and then letting them see the various projects and so forth because it kind of helps with buy-in,” said LaQuinta Daniels, Restorative Community Service program coordinator.

Projects have included working in the [4-H garden](#) at the 78th Street Heritage Farm, painting a mural in the lobby of the juvenile court and volunteering at community events including Vancouver’s [Juneteenth Freedom Celebration](#). Youth can also elect to help One Life Food Pantry pass out food boxes to those in need.

The county’s restorative justice program has 11 mentors trained to lead groups of youth in different projects year-round.

“They all just have unique talent, skills and abilities that they bring,” Daniels said. “They have this energy of wanting to work with kids and really recognizing and believing in second chances.”

#### 4-H garden

Chantal Krystiniak is one of the restorative justice program’s mentors, and she has also been Washington State University Clark County’s 4-H Youth Development program coordinator for the past four years. The county’s Juvenile Court has been working with the 4-H program since the early 2000s. The program at 78th Street Heritage Farm runs April through October.

“We do some hands-on, experiential education,” Krystiniak said.

On Aug. 16, youths participated in a workshop with the Cowlitz Tribe to learn to identify berries native to Washington. The kids were able to taste the berries, and the event ended with raspberry tea.

In past events, youth learned about the food system and how to grow herbs, greens, fruits and vegetables. At the end of the day, they are sent home with produce boxes.

“This is definitely an educational space and an opportunity for mastery for having a sense of accomplishment when they’re able to follow a recipe or work through following how to plant something,” Krystiniak said. “Having access to nature and fresh food is invaluable. That’s something we have to keep supporting and growing, especially with youth that are involved with the justice system.”

She became a mentor in February and has led projects at community gardens and events, such as face painting at Art in the Park.

“I just really love these kids,” Krystiniak said. “I love collaborating with people in the community and making partnerships.”

#### Continuing service

After participating in projects, some youths stay involved — even when their court-required community service is completed.

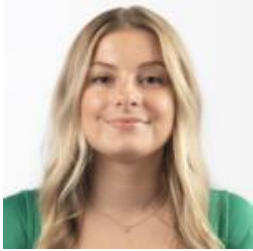
Organizations have had more kids show up for a project than are signed up because they enjoyed it so much the previous week, Simonsmeier said.

One kid joined a youth summit directed by River City Church for community service hours. He then talked to one of the church leaders and ended up joining the youth group, surrounding himself with positive peers and activities, Daniels said.

Clark County Juvenile Court Program Manager Dawn Young said service requirements can have a lasting impact on youth.

“We want the kids to walk away feeling a connection to their community,” she said, “because it’s a lot harder to harm somebody or harm something if you have a connection to it.”

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