

Young Leaders Learn About Law

On Tuesday evenings, students from across Irving and some surrounding communities gather at the Irving Criminal Justice Center to administer justice to their peers. They act as prosecutors, defense attorneys, jurors, bailiffs, court clerks, and master jurors in cases where the offender has pled guilty or no contest.

It's a program called Irving Teen Court, and it was launched in 1992 to alter the behavior of youthful offenders in a positive way and reduce recidivism. Teens learn a valuable lesson—that consequences come with making bad decisions.

Offending participants have been charged with Class C misdemeanors such as speeding, no driver's license, no insurance, theft, fighting, criminal mischief, trespassing, possession of drug paraphernalia, etc. In Teen Court, a jury of teen peers hears evidence, deliberates and renders a binding sentence. A sentence consists of community service hours and jury terms and could also include attendance at a life skills, anger management, or insurance class, a letter of apology to the victim or parent, or an essay on a topic relating to the offense. Those who successfully complete the program will have their tickets dismissed. Those who fail will have their cases returned to the Municipal Court where they must pay the fine. Teen Court is not a mock trial, but the real thing. Participants understand that they are actually affecting a person's life.

Volunteer Recruitment

The court is currently recruiting youth and adult volunteers to participate in the program. Teen volunteers must be between 14 and 17 (or still enrolled in high school) and undergo training before serving in the court. Teens serve as prosecuting and defense lawyers, clerks, bailiffs, jurors and master jurors (must have a driver's license or permit). It's an opportunity for youth volunteers to learn great skills in advocating, in public speaking and in dealing with the judicial system. Adult volunteers supervise the juries, help defendants with a check-out process, and oversee jury assignments. Attorneys may sit on the bench as Teen Court judges.