



THE FUTURE OF PROSECUTOR COMMUNITY OUTREACH: YOUTH PROGRAMS

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The National Best Practices Committee

Prosecutors' Center for Excellence's National Best Practices Committee (NBP) brings prosecutors together to share ideas, discuss challenges, and develop guidance on today's prosecution best practices.

The NBP includes experienced prosecutors from large and small offices in 29 states. The committee meets on a regular basis to collaborate on creating a vision for the prosecutor's office of the future and issuing papers related to that topic. This is the fifth NBP paper.

The mission of the NBP is to improve the criminal justice system by providing support, guidance, and considerations for prosecutors. The NBP addresses the challenging issues impacting victims, witnesses, the accused, and the community. The guiding principles for NBP's work are a commitment to justice, integrity, ethics, fairness, and equity for all.

See our work and our members at: [National Best Practices Committee Webpage](#)

Acknowledgments

This paper was written by Antonia Merzon, Senior Attorney with Prosecutors' Center for Excellence. The paper is based on the excellent work of eight prosecutor offices as they were presented by: Marilex Santana, Community Engagement Unit Director, Bronx District Attorney's Office, NY; Aishala Burgess, TRUCE Executive Director, East Baton Rouge District Attorney's Office, LA; Pak Kouch, Assistant Head Deputy, Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, CA; Ryan Mears, District Attorney, Marion County District Attorney's Office, IN; Kevin Steele, District Attorney, and Angela Bell, Youth Aid Panel Coordinator, Montgomery County District Attorney's Office, PA; Brian McFadden, Community Partnership Unit, New York County District Attorney's Office, NY; Mark Gibson, First Assistant Prosecuting Attorney, Platte County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, MO; and Anna Rossi Anderson, Chief Assistant District Attorney, Salt Lake County District Attorney's Office.



THE FUTURE OF PROSECUTOR COMMUNITY OUTREACH: YOUTH PROGRAMS

Introduction

This paper is the first in a series of papers issued by the National Best Practices Committee on community outreach by prosecutors. Beyond their traditional role in the criminal justice process, many prosecutor offices provide outreach programs to raise awareness in the community about public safety issues and resources, to create stronger community partnerships, and to improve the lives of the people they serve. This paper features prosecutor initiatives that go the extra step to support local youth in various ways, most of which are not associated with a criminal case. These programs create a model for the modern prosecutor of the future and should serve as inspiration for additional programs yet to be developed.

The eight programs reviewed below represent a variety of approaches that prosecutor offices are using to share their time and expertise in support of the kids in their communities.

Youth Aid Panel Program

Montgomery County District Attorney's Office, PA

The Youth Aid Panel program is a restorative justice program for youth who have engaged in non-violent behavior that puts them at risk for future contact with the criminal justice system. Youth Aid Panels (YAPs) are made up of adult volunteers from the community. The panels hear the details of a young person's misconduct and create "resolutions" for addressing the wrong that occurred. The overarching goal is to help youth consider the impact of their decisions on their futures and to help guide them away from destructive behavior.

Some of the common offenses that come before the YAPs include retail theft, marijuana vaping, disorderly conduct, criminal mischief, vandalism, and trespassing. YAP resolutions may require the young person to make amends for the infraction with an apology letter or community service. They also might direct the young person to educational resources, such as anger management classes. YAPs conduct weekly reviews of each participant's efforts to complete their resolutions.



The YAP program accepts youth ages ten to eighteen years old, and receives referrals from law enforcement agencies, school resource officers, and the probation department. Youth participants appear before a YAP panel in the area where they live or go to school. The program has 28 panels across the county and has recently expanded to include youth from neighboring Philadelphia. The program also has increased the number of young people it serves and the range of eligible offenses.

Since it was established in 2000, this cost-efficient, volunteer program has helped more than 500 youths annually, and 10,000 youths overall. Participants have demonstrated a 94% success rate in completing the program and staying out of trouble afterwards, with a recidivism rate of only 3 to 6%. The program also engages numerous adults in the community in keeping kids out of the juvenile justice system. As a result of the YAP program, the District Attorney's Office has seen a reduction in its juvenile caseload.

[View District Attorney Kevin Steele and Youth Aid Panel Coordinator Angela Bell, Montgomery County District Attorney's Office, PA discussing the program.](#)

More information about the Youth Aid Panel program can be found here:
[https://www.montgomerycountypa.gov/3616/Youth-Aid-Panel.](https://www.montgomerycountypa.gov/3616/Youth-Aid-Panel)

LEAD Program for Fifth Graders Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, CA

Project LEAD is a law-related program for fifth graders that is taught by volunteers from the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, in partnership with Teach Democracy. The LEAD Program's classroom curriculum is available to schools throughout the United States and Canada and emphasizes the theme of "making good decisions". Project LEAD's research has determined that the fifth-grade age range (around ten years old) is a critical period for education around this theme.

Classroom facilitators provide weekly instruction for twenty weeks during the school year. Curriculum topics include understanding the legal process and the criminal justice system, staying in school, refusal skills, conflict resolution, respect for diversity, becoming an ally versus a bystander, and public speaking. Students frequently engage in skits and role playing. The program also includes field trips to locations such as courthouses and the [Museum of Tolerance](#). At the end of the school year, students participate in a mock trial in a local courtroom, where they have the opportunity to meet judges and other professionals.



Attorneys, paralegals, hearing officers, field deputies, and law clerks from the District Attorney's Office have been volunteering as Project LEAD facilitators since 1993. Through these volunteer efforts, the program has reached over 45,000 students in dozens of schools across Los Angeles County. Project LEAD's follow-up studies have shown the protective effects of the program over time. Many participants demonstrate long-term knowledge and constructive attitudes about the legal system.

[View Assistant Head Deputy Pak Kouch of the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office, discussing the LEAD project.](#)

More information about the LEAD Program can be found here:

<https://projectlead.lacounty.gov/about-project-lead/>.

TRUCE Program

East Baton Rouge District Attorney's Office, LA

The TRUCE Program identifies and supports at-risk youth, with the goals of reducing violence in the community and helping young people live safely and productively. The program offers a range of services and resources to youth (ages 14-24) who are in gangs, on probation or parole, or have dropped out of school. Funding for the program comes from local businesses, private donors, the city of Baton Rouge, and school officials.

The TRUCE Program employs social workers who work directly with each participant. The program's services include employment and education assistance, substance abuse treatment, mental health assistance, and mentoring. Additional services are available for a youth participant's family members, including assistance in securing housing and employment. The program also works to ensure participants are accessing the available resources by providing rides to medical appointments and job interviews, and by helping clients obtain needed identity documents.

Participants are referred to the TRUCE Program by courts, social services providers, law enforcement agencies, and community members. Youth can also request to participate themselves. The program's social workers serve approximately 80 young people each year.

TRUCE also conducts walks in neighborhoods plagued by violence. The District Attorney, office staff members, law enforcement officers, business owners, and school officials walk through communities, speaking to kids about their needs and concerns. These festive events include



food, music, and a mobile basketball hoop. Through basketball games with members of law enforcement, local kids are connected to resources. They also have the opportunity to report violence in their neighborhoods in a discreet manner. After the walk, TRUCE volunteers return to the neighborhood to clean up and keep the lines of communication open.

The program also provides outreach at local high schools. Volunteers from the District Attorney's Office, U.S. Attorney's Office, and the Public Defenders' Office work with kids who are on the verge of dropping out of school. The volunteers provide law-related classes on the criminal justice system and encourage students to graduate. For younger kids, the TRUCE program offers Friday summer camps for those who otherwise cannot afford camp fees, as well as a free back-to-school basketball tournament every year.

[*View Executive Director of TRUCE Aishala Burgess, East Baton Rouge District Attorney's Office, LA discussing the program.*](#)

More information about the TRUCE Program can be found here: <https://www.callatrucebr.org>.

Daycare Center

Salt Lake County District Attorney's Office, UT

Salt Lake County provides a low-cost, in-house daycare center for employees of the District Attorney's Office, as well as for other county employees. The center is housed within the office's standalone building and was opened in 2018. Childcare is available for 14-16 children through a contract-based provider, with the county subsidizing half of the cost. The facilities also include a private room for nursing mothers.

Utah has the highest number of children and the largest average family size in the nation. The price for childcare in the Salt Lake City area is normally \$1,400 per month, per child. Under the county's programs, employees of the District Attorney's Office pay approximately \$700 per month. Having on-site childcare at a reduced cost allows many employees to manage financial and logistical challenges that might otherwise impact their ability to work.

[*View Chief Assistant District Attorney Anna Rossi Anderson, Salt Lake County District Attorney's Office discussing the program.*](#)



Handle with Care Program

Platte County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, MO

The Handle with Care program works to address the trauma a child might experience if present at the scene of a crime or an emergency event. Recent studies have shown that 60% of American children are exposed to violence, crime, or abuse. Behavioral issues at school are common among children who have been subjected to physical and psychological trauma, along with other negative impacts that can become lifelong problems. By ensuring children get assistance at the time they experience trauma, the program works to prevent a spiraling effect that might eventually lead the child into contact with the criminal justice system down the road.

Handle with Care was developed through a partnership between the District Attorney's Office and Beacon Mental Health, a local tax-supported mental healthcare provider. Together, they created a web-based program that allows local law enforcement officers to report the presence of children at traumatic events. If officers see a child (ages 5-18) at a traumatic event to which they respond, the officers input the child's name and address into the Handle with Care system. Based upon the child's address, the system notifies the school administrator in that geographical area. School personnel can then monitor the child and offer appropriate services as needed. From 2021-2022, the Handle with Care system received over 2,000 alerts.

Prosecutor offices are well-positioned to champion and facilitate the development of programs like Handle with Care because they regularly work with law enforcement, mental healthcare services, and the schools. Once the Platte County Prosecuting Attorney's Office helped establish the Handle with Care program, the office's direct involvement has not been needed to keep the program functioning.

[View First Assistant Prosecuting Attorney Mark Gibson, Platte County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, MO discussing the program.](#)

More information about Handle With Care can be found here: <https://handlewithcaremo.org>.

Saturday Night Lights Program

New York County District Attorney's Office, NY

Saturday Night Lights provides youth with high-quality sports and fitness programming on Friday and Saturday nights in communities most impacted by youth violence. The program was started by the New York County District Attorney's Office in 2011 and grew in size and popularity. In 2021, the New York City Police Department partnered with the New York City



Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), the City's District Attorneys, and community-based organizations to open 100+ gyms and expand the Saturday Night Lights program.

Office attorneys and staff serve as program volunteers. Saturday Night Lights has provided important benefits to the District Attorney's Office. By allowing staff to interact with community members outside of the courtroom, the program has both enhanced the office's perception in the community and provided staff with the opportunity to better understand the communities they serve. Through creating and running this program, the Office also has formed longstanding partnerships with other city agencies and community groups.

[View Brian McFadden from the Community Partnership Unit, New York County District Attorney's Office, NY discussing the program.](#)

More information about Saturday Night Lights can be found here:

<https://nypd.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=0598468e4d4f4246a05d60c18f185248>.

Youth Violence Fellowship Program and Project Cyber Safe

Marion County Prosecutor's Office, IN

The Youth Violence Fellowship program helps youth become leaders in their communities. Through an application-based summer fellowship, youth fellows come to the District Attorney's Office for classes and events focused on reducing youth violence and youth involvement with the criminal justice system. Participants meet elected officials, community leaders, and subject matter experts, and are encouraged to develop solutions to community problems. Members of the program also have opportunities to speak to the media about their community violence concerns and ideas for safety improvements.

Fellows in the program help design teaching curriculums focused on youth issues that are used by the District Attorney's Office in presentations to schools and community groups. They also advise on ways to better connect with youth in the community, such as through sports activities and school partnerships – and the office has acted upon many of these suggestions. The Youth Violence Fellowship program has given the office a better understanding of the problems that community youth are facing, and has improved both the office's youth outreach and its programming for juvenile criminal offenders.



As a result of youth fellows' input, the District Attorney's Office revamped Project Cyber Safe to address the violence stemming from social media interactions among kids, including the sale of drugs and guns via social media. The office now provides regular teaching sessions at schools on cyber safety issues. Topics include cybersecurity, the dangers of sexting, confrontation avoidance, and social media risks. Last year, Project Cyber Safe was at 68 schools in Marion County, reaching thousands of students.

[*View District Attorney Ryan Mears, Marion County District Attorney's Office, IN discussing the program*](#)

More information about the Youth Violence Prevention Fellowship can be found here: <https://www.indy.gov/activity/youth-violence-prevention-fellowship>.

Prom Shop Program

Bronx County District Attorney's Office, NY

For the past several years, the Bronx District Attorney's Office has spearheaded a Prom Shop program that helps teens obtain prom attire who otherwise could not afford it. The program was established in partnership with Bronx Fashion Week.

The office's collection efforts begin two to three months before the spring prom season. The District Attorney's Office seeks out vendors, organizations, and individual donors that will contribute dresses, suits, shoes, accessories, and makeup. Teens then come to a designated location to pick out their free prom outfits.

In its first year, the Prom Shop served 150-200 young people. Since then, the program has more than doubled in size and the offerings have expanded. Now, prom-goers also can get their hair and makeup done by professional stylists, and have professional photographs taken of their prom look. The Prom Shop is also funded through financial donations from community organizations and businesses.

[*View Director of the Community Engagement Unit Marilex Santana, Bronx District Attorney's Office, NY discussing the program.*](#)

More information about the Prom Shop program can be found here:



<https://www.bronxda.nyc.gov/downloads/pdf/pr/2022/46-2022%20BXDA-Prom-dress-suit-drive-giveaway.pdf>.

Conclusion

Prosecutor offices around the country have found diverse and innovative ways to connect with their communities by supporting local youth. As the eight examples highlighted in this paper demonstrate, prosecutors' youth outreach programs can provide crucial services to at-risk youth, as well as many forms of educational and social resources to kids of all ages. Prosecutor offices engaging in youth outreach also gain important benefits, such as improved community relationships, better understanding of youth concerns, and the wellness opportunity for office staff members to volunteer with local kids.