

YOUTH COURT OVERVIEW

All hearings take place at:

Elmendorf Reformed Church
171 East 121st Street, (Between 3rd and Lexington Avenue)
New York, NY 10035

By Public Transportation: Take the Lexington Avenue train line 4, 5, express or 6 local to 125th Street. Exit the train station and walk south on Lexington Avenue (in the direction of traffic) to 121st Street. Make a left on 121st Street. **By Bus:** Take the M101L Lexington Ave 125th St and walk south on Lexington Avenue (in the direction of traffic) to 121st Street. Make a left on 121st Street. Take the M103 to Lexington Ave and 121st, make a right and walk towards 3RD Ave on 121st Street.

By Car: Take the Harlem River/FDR drive north to 125th Street. Proceed to the stop sign. Stay left to a second stop sign. Make a right on 125th Street, stay left. Make a left at 2nd avenue (the first light). Proceed down 2nd Avenue to 121st Street. Make a right at 121st and proceed one block. (From Midtown Manhattan you may also take Park Avenue or Third Avenue uptown to 121st Street).

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The Harlem Youth Court is a program for young people aged 10 – 18 referred by local schools, police officers, probation officers, criminal court and the community for offenses such as curfew violations, vandalism, disorderly conduct and truancy. These young people appear before a judge and jury of their peers – other neighborhood teens – who determine fair and appropriate responses.

Before the youth court hearing, the referred youth – the “respondent” – meets with his or her “Youth Advocate,” a young person who represents the respondent throughout the case. During the hearing, the respondent tells his/her story and is questioned by members of the jury. Unlike in a traditional court, the purpose of the jury’s questioning is not just to learn more about the offense, but to understand better what led to the incident, how the respondent feels about his/her experience, and to prompt the respondent to reflect on his/her behavior. After considering all of the information and the respondent’s personal strengths, the jury decides on a fair and appropriate sanction that holds the youth accountable, restores harm done to the community, and assists the youth to avoid trouble in the future. Youth court staff members monitor the completion of sanctions and then report back to the referral source. Most cases move through this process, from intake to resolution, in one month, depending on the respondents’ ability to complete sanctions in a timely manner.

The Harlem Youth Court is a restorative justice program that emphasizes:

Responsibility: Youth court teaches young people that actions have consequences. Because this message comes from other young people, it is more likely to be heard and understood. The youth court process asks respondents to reflect on their actions and understand how their behavior affects others around them.

Restoring the Community: Respondents are often sanctioned to restore the harm done to their community through service, apologies and other actions. For example, youth have been sanctioned to help plant trees in local parks, help community groups set up for local events, and assist in local activities for younger children.

Help: The youth court links young people and their families to services such as counseling, and provides workshops to help youths make better decisions and avoid future involvement with the justice system.

Leadership: Youth court teaches young people how to be leaders. Members are trained in group-decision making, critical thinking and public speaking. The program provides a positive opportunity for young people to engage with judges, lawyers, criminal justice officials and the court system. In addition to this, former respondents are encouraged to become members.