

Youth Accountability Boards

How Prosecutors are Engaging Communities to Respond
to Low-Level Juvenile Offending

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Introduction
by Susan Motika
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In the mid-1990s in Denver there was a rash of graffiti crime. At the same time, residents were telling us that they felt shut out and that there wasn't an opportunity for citizen or victim input in the system. It seemed to us there was an opportunity here to both fight crime and directly engage the community in the process. That, in a nutshell, was the impetus for our youth accountability board program, what we call Community Accountability Boards (CABs). The conventional way of handling property crimes had not been an effective deterrent, nor was it assisting victims, the community or offenders. In contrast, our CAB program—which covers 17 Denver-area neighborhoods—succeeds in helping young people understand that they are accountable and that by owning up to their actions, they also connect to caring adults in the community.

What are these boards? A youth accountability board recruits, screens and trains volunteers from a designated neighborhood to mete out sanctions for low-level offenses. These volunteers meet with a young person who has committed an offense, along with his family. Direct victims are invited to participate in the meetings either in person or through a written statement. During the meeting, the young person gets a chance to air his story and to explain the circumstances that led him to commit the offense. The community members have an opportunity to explain the impact of the juvenile's behavior on the neighborhood. Participation is voluntary, and the goals are to hold the young person accountable; repair the harm done to the direct victim and affected community; and provide the young person with the help needed to avoid further offending. Each meeting results in a contract that the youth agrees to complete within a certain time frame, with conditions such as an apology letter, restitution, community service, educational components, and more.

The goal of this paper is to set out the essential elements of youth accountability boards; highlight their benefits to prosecutors, board participants and communities; and offer concrete advice to those interested in starting a new board program. The paper will also suggest ways to gauge a program's success, chart the evolution of board programs and look to the future of accountability boards as an innovative crime-fighting tool.

Youth accountability boards go by many names: they are called Community Justice Committees in Maricopa County, Arizona; Neighborhood Conference

Committees in Travis County, Texas; Community Panels for Youth in Cook County, Illinois; and Restorative Justice Conferences in Winona County, Minnesota.

While the names differ, the underlying philosophy is the same: these boards can help prosecutors better address low-level juvenile crime and restore the public's faith in the justice system. "There's a huge benefit in terms of the public trust—that's what comes back to us," says Denver District Attorney Bill Ritter. "I really do see a benefit to communities, that they can have a role in changing the quality of life in their community."

In Chicago, prosecutors tell a similar story: "I became convinced that just running one juvenile after another through the [criminal justice] process was not the solution to the problem," says State's Attorney Richard A. Devine of Cook County. For Devine, youth accountability boards are "an opportunity for juveniles to avail themselves of the resources in the community and try to turn their lives around."

While the programs featured in this paper are relatively new, youth accountability boards have a long history—they have been in the United States since the 1920s. But prosecutors, criminal justice professionals and community-based organizations are now adapting them to their needs in accelerating numbers. Gordon Bazemore and Mara Schiff of Florida Atlantic University recently found that 94 percent of states have some kind of restorative conferencing program (an umbrella term that encompasses youth accountability boards). They counted 773 "youth conferencing" programs nationwide.¹

Researchers from Public/Private Ventures have endorsed boards as a "promising approach for working with first-time youthful offenders," having studied in-depth Philadelphia's Youth Aid Panels. The Public/Private Ventures study found three noteworthy elements of that board program: its community-based nature, its balanced approach emphasizing both accountability and support, and the involvement of the local District Attorney's Office. It concluded, "Through the panel process, low-level offenders experience a more significant response to their crime than courts can currently offer."²

Local prosecutorial interest in youth accountability boards is part of a larger story taking place within the American criminal justice system. Over the past generation, police, prosecutors, judges and other criminal justice officials have begun to look for new ways to engage citizens in doing justice. Advocates of "community justice" have encouraged prosecutors to take new interest in crime prevention and low-level crimes and adopt a problem-solving approach to public-safety issues. In response, a host of community prosecution programs have emerged across the country to pursue innovative ways (and non-enforcement strategies) to fight crime such as improving the lighting on a street or using civil sanctions to attack nuisance crime. Along the way, these programs have aggressively reached out to communities to identify local problems and develop collaborative responses.

Prosecutors who are new to community prosecution and its achievements may find its inclusive approach a bit foreign—indeed, some have wrongly dismissed it

as “social work.” Instead, it’s the product of seeking out effective ways to respond to community members’ concerns about crime.

Youth accountability boards are a reflection of community prosecution principles: they focus on low-level juvenile crime and the justice system’s failure to adequately address it; they are neighborhood-based; they handle cases of interest to the community; and they engage a range of partners, including not just community groups but courts, probation and the police as well.

Youth accountability boards have potentially far-reaching ramifications. They help victims, whose voices are sought out and incorporated into the process. They help community members express how they feel about crime in their neighborhoods. Communities benefit through young peoples’ community service hours. Juveniles benefit, often avoiding the stigma associated with a juvenile record while being given a chance to right their ways. And the juvenile court system benefits through reduced caseloads, increased efficiency and lowered court costs. Some programs even generate revenue: King County, Washington’s CAB program, which handled 2,912 cases in 2002, generated \$316,066 in fees that same year. Among the tangible benefits for prosecutors are the following:

A Proportional Response Before we started our youth accountability boards program in Denver, graffiti taggers rarely felt the brunt of real consequences for their actions. Accountability boards, by contrast, offer a proportional response to this public safety problem—they hold young people accountable for their actions while providing more supervision than is usually available through conventional channels.

Promotion of Public Safety If the prosecutor’s job is crime control, then her job-performance measure is public safety. While prosecutors tend to be trained to think that simply prosecuting cases and punishing offenders will ensure public safety, more and more prosecutors are embracing the idea that they must also make an investment in crime-prevention strategies. “Safety is based upon relationships in communities,” says Cheryl Graves, an attorney and co-founder of the accountability board program in Cook County, Ill. “If you’re talking about dealing with long-term safety concerns, [accountability boards] can go a long way.”

“Any time someone’s made to realize the consequences of their actions—not only the consequences for them but for other people—it creates a safer environment for everybody,” says Christian Gunderson, assistant state’s attorney for Winona County, Minnesota. In addition, the more prosecutors know about constituents’ concerns, the more effectively they can respond, thus building their credibility with the public. Further, improved relationships with community members and increased faith in the justice system means that people are more likely to serve as witnesses and jurors, to report crime and to assist enforcement efforts.

Early Intervention Youth accountability boards help put young offenders back on

track by linking them to needed services such as counseling or educational workshops. As justice officials, we may have set the bar too low, calling it a success when a young person meets with his parole officer and passes a drug test. But how does this contribute to positive character development, how does it build on the juvenile's skills and help him avoid further offending? With CABs, our hope is to have a hand in creating a new story where a young person can say, "I finished high school and I volunteered for a nonprofit organization." Maybe then a college or employer will look at him more seriously.

A Voice for Victims One of the fundamental elements of boards is that they provide a new avenue for victim input—both the direct victim, and the community-as-victim. In the process, the boards help combat feelings of alienation from the judi-

Bottle Rockets in School: a Mother's Perspective

BACKGROUND: *A twelve-year-old boy named James brought bottle rockets to school, planning to set them off after class. When a casual friend asked him for one, he obliged, but later, in class, he heard a whistling sound and knew immediately what it was. The other boy had set the bottle rocket off in the stairwell while school was in session.*

This middle school is part of the Denver DA's Community Accountability Board pilot program, and James was brought before a panel. Participating in the panel were James, his parents, the assistant principal, the school security guard, a trained facilitator and a community member.

MOTHER OF JAMES: When James got in trouble, we were shocked—it was a bad decision on his part. We had an initial meeting with a CAB person and spoke about everything that had happened. She asked James some questions to see how he was responding—if he was sorry. That went really well.

Then, at the CAB meeting, what I liked is that everybody got to speak: James got to say what had happened, that it was a bad decision, that he was very sorry. And I liked that they saw that we're very supportive of him. The community volunteer brought up some stuff that was very important, like wondering how many other kids bring in things that we don't know about and pointing out that if James set off the fireworks, they could've landed on somebody's roof and set the house on fire. She brought up all that stuff to make James realize what could've happened.

Now as part of his contract he has to do a fire-setter's presentation to three of his classes, and he's scared to death of it – that will be a learning experience for him. I've told him, this will start preparing you for high school, where you might have to do things like this. He also had to write a letter of apology and do community service at the school. He's been following through and we've been helping him. I told him, we're here to make sure that you learn a lesson.

cial system. “I think oftentimes the victim can feel excluded,” says Gunderson, of Winona County. “They sometimes feel that no one’s listening to them—I think the [boards] really help with that.”

A Stronger Community “The goal of the prosecutor is not just to count up numbers but also to help the community,” says Devine of Cook County. Prosecutors are in a unique position to play a catalyst role here. “This is an opportunity for prosecutors to be leaders, . . . strengthening informal social control in the community,” says Bazemore. Bringing neighbors together and strengthening community ties peel away the layers of anonymity that can sometimes encourage antisocial behavior. Accountability boards can be a vehicle for fostering relationships between struggling young people and positive adults in the community. Studies show that mentored youth are less likely to act out.³

Access to Partners and Resources Finally, starting an accountability board allows prosecutors to tap into the infrastructure of a neighborhood in a deeper way, figuring out which tenant leaders are important, which churches are influential, which social service providers are effective. The planning process can also breed local leaders, encouraging community members to get involved in the civic life of their community and giving them new skills and contacts that they can bring to other endeavors.

The bottom line is that youth accountability boards can be a valuable tool in a prosecutor’s arsenal, addressing minor youth crime and achieving a host of ancillary benefits at the same time.

As strong as the rhetorical arguments are in favor of youth accountability boards, the ultimate test of these initiatives is not different from any other project: Do they work?

Research in this field is still in its infancy, and programs rarely build capacity for thorough research into their budgets. Still, what we do know is encouraging. Many of the programs highlighted here report good recidivism rates, high satisfaction and large, stable pools of committed volunteers. It’s also important to bear in mind that modest gains in juvenile justice can be big news. It’s difficult to turn around the life of a troubled young person, but when you do, it helps not just him but also his family, his school, his community and public safety as a whole.

What follows is a more detailed look at the accountability board model as it is being employed in a number of states across the country.

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Each of the programs surveyed for this paper has a youth accountability board program that reflects its own philosophy, planning process and unique local culture. Still, it is possible to identify some common elements:

Juveniles Programs tend to focus on teens, with a cutoff age of 17 or 18.

Low-Level Offenses Especially when starting out, boards primarily accept nonviolent first-time offenders, the types of youth who would normally get little judicial attention but might benefit from greater community oversight. Youth accountability boards seek to make sure that all criminal behavior receives some sort of response.

Accountability This is the cornerstone. Through the board process, offenders learn that they are accountable to the victim, their own family, the community and the justice system. This is typically driven home via a well-crafted contract, specifying the services the offender will receive and the restitution he will perform.

Voluntary Participation By and large, youth accountability boards are voluntary—offenders must affirmatively choose to participate. Even when going to a board is a condition of probation, offenders may opt out after an initial meeting.

Trained Volunteers All programs use what Denver calls “affected community members” on the boards—driving home the idea that there are no victimless crimes. Volunteers generally receive a half-day to two full days of training. In some cases, volunteers receive additional training to facilitate board meetings.

Signed Contract Whether the board members craft the contract among themselves or permit suggestions from the youth, it’s critical to the program’s success that the youth understand and agree to its terms, which tend to include community service, restitution and an apology letter or essay. Contracts require that the youth not re-offend during the contract period, and a failure to comply with the terms will generally send the juvenile back into the conventional judicial system.

Victim Input This helps offenders understand the consequences of their actions. Victims may be present at meetings, interviewed by phone, or submit written impact statements.

Family Involvement Requiring the presence of parents or guardians at board meetings can add to the juvenile’s accountability and help uncover what’s happening in the young person’s life. It’s also necessary because offenders are minors.

Repairing Harm The boards typically require that juveniles “make things right” with both the direct victim (if there is one) and the community through restitution and/or community service.

Social Services Many boards provide tailored social services, such as counseling or drug treatment, in an attempt to address critical issues in the young person's life.

Programs can vary in other aspects. Some accountability board programs don't make monetary restitution part of their contracts, while other boards do. For example, King County, Washington's restitution cap is \$600, and its program returned \$6,881 in restitution to victims in 2001.

The seriousness of the eligible offenses is another point of divergence, with some programs (like Denver's) focusing more on property crimes while others include more severe offenses.

Pre-meeting preparation and the board meetings themselves can differ, too. Regarding preparation, more is generally better, laying the foundation for a constructive group conversation. Still, the ability to do supplemental phone interviews or additional training for participants often depends on staffing, which can be tight.

Regarding meeting formats, some treat everyone as an equal participant and have the youth help craft his or her contract, while others are less interactive, with community members on one side of the table and the youth on the other. Again, the choice will be determined by local culture and even simple gut feeling. "The important thing to keep in mind is it doesn't matter [how you do it] . . . as long as you're really looking at offender accountability, a healing opportunity for the victims to the greatest extent possible, and community input and participation in the process," says David Mrakitsch, of Denver.

How Can Prosecutors Start a Youth Accountability Board?

Starting a new program is always a delicate balance between borrowing good ideas that have been tested elsewhere and tailoring them to local needs. Here's how to get started:

Identify Stakeholders The first thing to ask is, who will have a stake in this program? Who needs to be involved in the planning stages? Which community members are willing to help? Who holds decision-making authority in the local juvenile justice system, and who of that group is open to new ideas? Finding an ally, someone who shares your vision, can give the project the necessary momentum.

Research the Law Second, what is the legislative framework? What existing laws can help (or hinder) a youth accountability board? A provision already on the books encouraging justice professionals to incorporate greater victim involvement into their practice can help prosecutors make the case for accountability boards. And a law mandating diversion of first-time young offenders means that the referral mechanism is already in place—now it's just a matter of adding a youth accountability board to the menu of available options.

Find Funding How much money will you need and where will you get it? These are tough fiscal times, with local governments trimming budgets and even laying off

staff. While the youth accountability board is a volunteer-rich model, even the leanest of programs require at least one paid staff member. Some programs have reassigned existing staff to make the accountability boards happen. Others have raised new funds from state agencies and private foundations. While there are many ways to get the job done, it's important to understand that creating new projects takes work and demands the attention of dedicated staff—this can't be done by a summer intern or by an assistant D.A. on the weekend. There are many board models to choose from, with the number of paid staff ranging from just one full-time coordinator (Denver) to seven full and part-time staff members (Travis County).

Many programs keep budgets modest by sharing office space with other agencies. Accountability board meetings can take place in donated spaces like schools, church basements, or in the case of one Chicago neighborhood, a halfway house for female ex-prisoners. Direct costs are further minimized by the use of volunteers and the donation of in-kind resources. And some programs trade services—Travis County, for example, has swapped grant-writing expertise for access to counseling for the program's participants.

Build Partnerships Partnering with key players is critical. During the planning phase, staff should identify key players; invite them to meetings and ask for (and take into account) their input. Many prosecutors have created letters of agreement with program partners that clearly define goals and responsibilities. But that isn't the end of partnering, it's just the beginning. "Be aware that when you get a memorandum of understanding, you may have an agreement regarding principles, but getting a response on the ground level will require ongoing efforts," says Mrakitsch. The obstacles to effective inter-agency collaboration are many. Workloads are heavy, turf battles can be fierce and resistance to change is a constant reality.

The best medicine is to demonstrate to potential partners how broken things are, and then show how accountability boards can help. Make the case with hard data. Use numbers from other successful programs—recidivism and satisfaction rates, dollar values of restitution and community service hours, etc. Go beyond broad concepts and enumerate specific, concrete benefits to the players at hand. For example, Cook County's project coordinator, Geoffrey Banks, in an effort to increase referrals to his accountability boards, designed and delivered a short presentation for prosecutors to help them better explain the benefits of accountability boards to victims, who in that jurisdiction must consent to cases' diversion. Another way to sell a youth accountability board is to take someone to see a board in action.

Partnering with community groups can be tricky, particularly for prosecutors. "One of our biggest challenges was there were a lot of turf wars going on," says Graves, of Cook County. Bringing local leaders together requires time, patience and dogged determination. "A lot of organizations would say 'What's in it for us?'" says Graves. The thing to emphasize is that boards give communities a seat at the table; they also aid neighborhoods through the young people's increased accountability and community service hours.

Case Referrals How will eligible cases be identified and then referred to the accountability board? There are a variety of potential sources: prosecutors, police, probation, courts, schools and more.

Once referrals are generated, there still may be the question of timing. How quickly are cases arriving at accountability boards after a young person’s arrest? The goal is to promote immediacy: an effective board “provides youth with a strong and swift dose of community censure.”⁴ The faster the referral, the more swift the consequences.

Select a Neighborhood Which neighborhood would be best suited for a pilot program? Potential neighborhoods should bring enthusiasm to the project as well as real juvenile crime problems. Cook County program planners, for example, looked at a map of Chicago’s neighborhoods to see where most of the juvenile cases were originating, particularly where first- or second-time offenders were committing misdemeanors or nonviolent felonies. Once they tentatively decided on a pilot neighborhood, they visited local organizations to confirm their analysis and cultivate potential partners.

Social Services It can be difficult to find a neighborhood with both a juvenile crime problem and social-service resources that can aid young people; often it is precisely the lack of such services that exacerbates local crime.

When spending time in the target neighborhood, ask about services—are there social service providers in the neighborhood, and are they any good? Program planners don’t have to do all the work themselves. Nor do they have to become experts in social work. Most accountability board programs have advisory boards—made up of community representatives like business leaders, school staff, clergy, youth service providers and others—that serve a variety of functions such as helping identify potential volunteers, reviewing program policies and identifying social-service resources.

Bottle Rockets in School: a Volunteer’s Perspective

PAULA JEANE, VOLUNTEER: I’m a lifelong teacher. I’ve worked with teens all my life. I’m interested in how things can be done better, and the Community Accountability Boards are a win-win type of situation.

I felt that the student who brought bottle rockets to school really learned from this experience, from the CAB. I liked that the parents were really supportive of the whole process and were involved. The meeting was really balanced, people got to talk, it felt safe. I feel that this will really make a difference in the boy’s life.

I think this kind of program is extremely important. The community doesn’t always know that these things are going on, that these kids don’t feel that they belong. We need to stay informed about that and take some responsibility. That’s what the CAB is all about.

But identification is only the half of it: “It gets old as soon as you put it on paper,” says Graves. “It requires ongoing work.” Advisory board members can also serve as informal referral mechanisms, using their power within the community to gain access to otherwise costly services. Which services are most important? Drug treatment? Tutoring? Family counseling? New accountability boards may want to focus on one or two services rather than trying to provide every service under the sun.

Once social service partners are on board, program staff should turn their attention to ensuring that young people’s needs are being properly assessed during the board meeting process so that appropriate referrals can be made and built into contracts.

Recruit Volunteers Accountability boards could not operate without volunteers—they bring to the process an understanding of the real-life impact of delinquent behavior. Most programs seek volunteers who live in the designated neighborhood because they are most affected by the crimes in question and because they, hopefully, will take an interest in “their” youth. Getting the first volunteers to sign up often comes as a result of planners’ early conversations with community groups and local leaders. Other programs publish fliers, advertise on local web sites, visit community events and faith-based organizations, make public-service announcements on the radio and get newspaper and television coverage.

Perhaps the most effective recruiting tool is old-fashioned word-of-mouth. King County’s accountability board program asks volunteers for names of other people who might be interested in participating. Parents of youth who have been through the county’s accountability board process are another source of volunteers—in King County, an estimated 10 to 15 percent of the overall pool is comprised of these parents.

Screen and Train Volunteers Once recruited, volunteers need to be screened for criminal records, particularly child abuse. Another important screening mechanism is bringing candidates to observe a board meeting—that way they can see first-hand what they are being trained for and be sure that it’s what they had in mind.

Eligible recruits then require training—which can last a half-day to two full days. Program staff and people from cooperating agencies do the training, and elected prosecutors often visit training sessions to send a strong message that there is system support for the program. Devine tries to attend each training to “let people know how committed we are.”

Travis County’s program staff take their trainings on the road, traveling to locations convenient to people who have shown an interest in volunteering. “Anything we can do that’s creative to get volunteers on board,” says Vanessa Moore. She and her staff also find that a slumping economy can make it that much more difficult to attract volunteers: strapped for time and money, community members may want to help but lack the capacity. The key is to be flexible, offering volunteers different levels of commitment based on their availability.

The importance of rigorous volunteer training can't be overstated—it's the best way to address concerns about fairness and effectiveness. "It's vital to train volunteers about the types of offenses and about the range of ways to address them," says Mrakitsch, of Denver. Volunteers should be trained to avoid pontificating and finger wagging in favor of fostering constructive dialogue and contract writing. "You have to be careful [the board] does not become a vigilante group," says Cherie Townsend of Maricopa County. "On the other hand, care must also be taken to insure victims of juvenile crime are included, supported and heard during the process," she adds. "It's all about balance."

Training typically includes a program overview, key values and principles, conflict-resolution strategies, simulated board meetings and guest speakers. In some jurisdictions, as in Cook County and Denver, veteran volunteers play a central role in training.

Retain Volunteers "When you're starting, it's really easy to get excitement about a new project," says Deborah Britton of Travis County. "The real challenge is to keep it going." "Volunteer attrition is something the program must constantly address," says Mary Kay Long, of Maricopa. Regular trainings can help maintain volunteers' interest and commitment. Travis County invites volunteers to attend staff meetings and seminars as a way to foster a sense of belonging.

Another way to combat attrition is to have recognition ceremonies for long-serving volunteers. King County, whose program began in 1959, has been known to hand out 30-year pins. "We have 200-plus people who've been volunteering here for over five years," says the program's Bob Brunswig. Public recognition helps volunteers feel that their work matters.

The upside of natural attrition is that it keeps the group of volunteers from stagnating. Filling empty seats can reinvigorate a board, bringing fresh faces and perspectives to the program.

Identify Community Service Opportunities Most, if not all, board programs have a community service element that enables young people to pay back the community they have harmed. Designing a community service program takes care and thorough research—it's an ongoing process often involving trial and error and constant updating.

The best community service projects for young people aren't make-work nor are they a form of public shaming. They have an educational component, tapping young peoples' talents and interests—for example, a graffiti tagger may be interested in studying art, or a bicycle thief might like to learn how to do repairs. In Winona County's program young people work in a bicycle shop learning how to fix two-wheelers that are then donated to needy residents. Elsewhere, youth accountability boards have teamed up with youth-oriented groups like the Boys and Girls Club or local community centers to provide service projects.

Of course, the best-case scenario is to have a young person learn how to fix a bicycle from an adult who ultimately becomes a mentor. As Graves says, “The goal is to connect these kids to people in the community who will be there when the contract is up.” The Public/Private Ventures study of Philadelphia’s boards program encouraged them to go beyond contract monitoring to connect youth to mentors and structured activities over the long haul.⁵ Thinking through long-term engagement strategies is an important goal but not an easy task, with some programs concerned about burning out volunteers or putting young people at risk through unmonitored adult-youth contact.⁶

How to Know When an Accountability Board Is Working

Evaluation is critical to the long-term prospects of a youth accountability board. In the early stages of planning, staff should clearly articulate the program’s goals and begin to think through how best to gauge their attainment. The reality is that most outside observers (press, funders, community residents) will be focused on recidivism—do youth offenders who participate in youth accountability boards get rearrested? While this obviously is an important indicator of success, the truth is that rigorous recidivism studies are expensive and take years to conduct. For this reason, it is important for accountability boards to articulate and document a range of different outcome measures, including compliance with alternative sanctions, victim satisfaction and public trust in justice.

The numbers from this paper’s highlighted jurisdictions are encouraging. For example, a study of 458 juveniles in Marion County, Indiana, found that those who had successfully completed the accountability board program were rearrested 12.3 percent of the time compared to 22.7 percent for the control group (who were sent to one of the county’s 23 other diversion programs).⁷ Further, in Winona County, just 11 out of a total 196 youths have reoffended since the program’s inception in 1998. Travis County has a 90 percent contract completion rate, and Denver averages 4.2 on a scale of one to five (five being the highest) in satisfaction with offenders, community members and victims of crime.

Evaluation can be an intimidating task for a small, over-burdened staff, many of whom are volunteers. Nevertheless, even the most modest programs need to track information. Here are some basic building blocks for measuring program success:

Caseload Staff should keep track of caseload, both the number of cases handled and the percentage of a jurisdiction’s total volume of juvenile cases that go through the youth accountability board. What kinds of cases come to the accountability board (e.g., truancy, shoplifting, etc.) and how quickly are they resolved?

Volunteers How many volunteers have been trained? How long do they serve? Just as important, how do they feel about the process? Pre/post surveys can help document the attitudes of volunteers.

Contract Completion Rate Of the juveniles who sign a contract at the end of a meeting, how many successfully meet its conditions? What happens to youth who fail to comply?

Community Service How many hours are young people spending on public works in the community? And what is the estimated dollar value of that work?

Restitution If a program provides for monetary restitution, what is the dollar amount returned to victims each year?

Victim Participation To the extent that there are direct victims, has the program reached out to them, and what percentage of them has participated?

Satisfaction Rates Most programs have participants fill out surveys after board meetings and sometimes also after contract completion. Sample questions are: Are you satisfied with the meeting's outcome? Does the young person understand the harm he caused? Will this agreement help repair the harm? Was the offender held accountable?

Cost Savings An argument can be made that accountability boards operating as diversion programs save the juvenile justice system money. Tracking costs and benefits can be almost as difficult as tracking recidivism, but if a program can attract an experienced evaluator, it's worth investigating.

When thinking about program impacts, one crucial thing to remember is humility: Don't over promise. The reality is that young people involved in criminal behavior—even low-level criminal behavior—lead complicated lives. Even the best accountability board program isn't going to change every participant's life trajectory. Acknowledging this up front will reduce the potential for disappointment among funders, the media and community residents.

How Accountability Boards Have Evolved over Time

Just as other community prosecution methods progress and change with time, so do accountability board programs. Here are a few ways they do:

More Boards Once a program is up and running—and running well—often the next thing to do is to open it up to more young people through replication.⁸ In the case of Cook County, the board program offers technical assistance to neighborhoods wanting their own boards. Other programs play a more active role in expansion, setting yearly benchmarks and aggressively reaching out to new communities.

Better Training Training can always be improved, and that's often what happens over time with accountability board programs. For example, Maricopa County didn't offer formal training when it started its board program but now offers rigorous quarterly training. A new program in Taylor County, Illinois, plans to offer more extensive train-

ing after getting feedback from volunteers that its first round was too minimal. And Travis County expects to establish bimonthly training shortly.

Expanding Youth Eligibility Also part of the evolution process is tweaking eligibility requirements—for example, what kinds of offenses are on the list, and are second-time offenders allowed to participate? Would it be appropriate to include more serious cases? Would partnering with schools be an effective way to broaden the referral base? Denver is doing just that with a pilot program that trains 13 area middle schools in accountability board principles and methods.

Expanding Volunteer Eligibility Cook County is showing some willingness to consider whether someone who’s “been there,” who relates more concretely to a young person’s circumstances, might be an effective and appropriate panel volunteer. “Occasionally we have volunteers who seem to relate real well who have criminal backgrounds, but don’t serve on panels,” says Cathy Ryan of the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office. “I think that’s an issue that deserves more study.” Presently volunteers with criminal backgrounds have no contact with young people.

Institutionalization The most stabilizing thing that can happen to a program as it matures is institutionalization—in other words, it graduates from being a demonstration project supported with special funding and becomes standard part of the local juvenile justice system. Travis County is in that club, and Maricopa is partially funded by its county.

Conclusion

Ken Weinstein, a retired colonel in the military police, was looking for a way to give back, to make a difference with young people. He found King County’s accountability board program and loved it, serving as a volunteer for 10 years before moving to Florida in 2003 (where he’s on the lookout for a similar program). “I felt a tremendous reward from being able to deal with juvenile offenders when there was still a chance to possibly help,” he says. That’s exactly what drives these programs—the desire to step in early, to hold youths accountable while steering them onto a more constructive and law-abiding path.

Accountability boards are no walk in the park for offenders: “I think that the process is more difficult than going in front of the judge,” says Joyce Kaczorowski, of Winona County. Indeed, having to answer to victims, parents and community members in one pass can be daunting. These programs also invite greater participation from victims, who can feel marginalized in conventional judicial proceedings. And they empower communities to tackle local juvenile crime.

What is the future of youth accountability boards? “What may start as a small program can become a springboard for effective problem-solving on many levels, both within the prosecutor’s office and the larger community,” says Susan Motika, of Denver.

In the meantime, accountability board programs continue to bring stakeholders together in an effort to stem the tide of low-level juvenile crime. “The community was demanding solutions that went beyond processing kids through the traditional juvenile court system,” says Denver D.A. Bill Ritter. “I have found that most prosecutors, when they see how youth accountability boards work, embrace them as a way to restore public trust by both responding to the community’s needs and fighting juvenile crime more effectively.”

Notes

1. Mara Schiff, Ph.D. and G. Bazemore, “Understanding Restorative Conferencing: A Case Study in Informal Decisionmaking in the Response to Youth Crime.”

2. Nina W. Chernoff and Bernadine H. Watson (Public/Private Ventures), “An Investigation of Philadelphia’s Youth Aid Panel,” p. 9.

3. Tierney, J.P., Grossman, J.B., and Resch, N.L. *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*, Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, (1995). The study shows that mentored young people are less likely to start using drugs or alcohol; less likely to hit someone; improved school attendance and attitudes; and improved peer and family relationships.

4. Chernoff and Watson, p.9.

5. Chernoff and Watson, p. 11.

6. King County’s code of conduct prohibits contact between volunteers and the board’s youth outside the parameters of board meetings, using paid case managers to monitor contract compliance.

7. Edmund F. McGarrell, “Restorative Justice Conferences as an Early Response to Young Offenders,” OJJDP *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, August 2001, Table 4.

8. Maricopa County, the eldest program highlighted here, has the largest number of boards in neighborhoods: 48. Denver covers 17 communities, Cook and Travis Counties 6 each, and the smaller Winona one.

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