

How It Works

The City of Holland, in cooperation with the Ottawa County Juvenile Court and the Holland Police Department, provides a Teen Court Program that is threefold: (1) to interrupt developing patterns of criminal behavior, (2) to promote self-improvement and (3) to educate peer jurors about the legal system and local authority processes. The underlying philosophy of HTC is that a youthful law violator does not continue to be an offender when a jury of his or her peers decides sentencing.

In order to go through HTC, the offender must be a juvenile first-time offender between the ages of 10 and 17 who pleads guilty to a selected criterion of misdemeanors. If the offender pleads guilty, accepts the sentence and successfully completes the process, the charges are dismissed.

HTC peer juries are made up of trained high school students from Holland High and Holland Christian. High school staff and volunteers work with students year-round to produce a professional and prepared jury.

Judges for HTC are local attorneys, judges, and court officials who volunteer their time to preside over the sessions. Normally, sessions take place in our District Courtroom or in the Ottawa County Family Court. The same respect and protocol that are observed in a courtroom are expected during all HTC sessions. A parent is required to appear with the offender at the session.

The Teen Court Coordinator holds a pre-hearing meeting with the offender and at least one parent to explain the Teen Court process. At this meeting, a thorough overview of HTC history, consent forms, and "what to expect" are all addressed. Both the offender and the parent(s) are given the opportunity to ask questions in order to prepare for the session.

The courtroom procedure begins when the Court Clerk announces commencement of the session. The defendant is sworn in and the jury questioning then begins. The peer jury determines the sentence for the offender by asking probing and inquisitive questions of both the offender and his or her parent(s).

The jury is trained to ask questions that will help them make a fair judgment. A strong focus is placed on (1) hearing the offender's feelings about the incident, (2) the offender's perspective regarding consequences for the misdemeanor and (3) the affect it has had on his or her life and on his or her family.

Once the jury and the Judge are satisfied with the spectrum of questioning of offender and parent(s), the jury goes into deliberation. The jury practices trained deliberation procedures. At the point of consensus, the jury returns to the courtroom and presents the sentence to the offender. Along with the required sentence, a due date is given.

Following the session, the offender and parent(s) meet with the Teen Court Coordinator to review the session outcome, paperwork, and sentence requirements. All sentences must be completed by the due date in order for the offender to achieve successful completion of the process and have the formal charges dismissed by the Juvenile Court.

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