

OPINION: Youth Court is Worth Praising and Preserving



By Justin Braga and Adam Vieira.

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New Bedford's leaders and residents constantly grapple with finding positive attributes that set the city of New Bedford apart from other communities in Massachusetts and the United States. While it may have been unbeknownst to many, New Bedford became a pioneer for restorative justice in October 2002 by establishing the Commonwealth's first youth court. Today, under the new name of New Bedford and Fall River Youth Courts, this juvenile diversion program has set the bar high for positively transforming the lives of youths who have committed misdemeanor offenses by providing them with a realistic hearing process and allowing them to reconcile their wrongs through community service. Yet, once again, diminished funds have put this program in jeopardy and have forced it to cease its operations. Taking into account youth court's proven track record, fiscal responsibility and our collective moral

conviction, we argue that our city leaders and state delegation should step up to the plate to ensure that this rare gem of restorative justice is given long-term sustainability for future generations of New Bedford's children.

Ask almost any respondent, parent, or volunteer who has been associated with New Bedford Youth Court about the program's effectiveness and they will tell you that it has a life-changing impact on the lives of so many in our community. The statistics support the countless personal stories that attest to the program's positive impact. The most recent data shows that, on average, 92% of respondents who have gone through the youth court system have completed their sanctions and have not reoffended during the 120-day sanctioning period. Youth Court also posts an impressive recidivism rate. For respondents who entered Youth Court during the 2009-2010 academic year, only 13% had reoffended within a year after completing the program. In 2007-2008, only 14% had reoffended after one year, while only 29% had committed additional offenses after three years of completing the program. That means nearly three quarters of respondents who went through New Bedford Youth Court did not get into additional trouble with the law and demonstrated superb reforms to their character. On the other hand, the recidivism rate associated with the juvenile court system pales in comparison to that of youth court, signifying youth court's ability to oftentimes outperform conventional judicial means. Also, given the copious amounts of academic literature that have condemned out-of-school suspension as an effective means of discipline, Youth Court should be looked to as a beacon for disciplining young people, while ensuring that they are granted a second chance to be productive members of society.

Impressively, Youth Court has been able to change so many lives at a fraction of the cost of traditional juvenile detention. While detaining a child at a Department of Youth

Services facility can cost upwards of \$100,000, a respondent can receive services for six months from Youth Court for only \$1,200. Take a moment to ponder how many more youth could be served by a more restorative means of justice if financial resources were redirected from juvenile incarceration to the youth court program. On paper and in practice youth court is more favorable than juvenile incarceration and everyone knows it is. In addition to being an outlet for restorative justice, New Bedford Youth Court has allowed an abundance of high school students in the Greater New Bedford area who are interested in law to be exposed to the legal profession through proactive public service. As former volunteer attorneys, Youth Court undoubtedly changed our lives and provided us with indispensable interactions with members of our community.

Guided by our principles as a forgiving people and a community that believes that everyone should have the opportunity to succeed, we humbly ask the leaders and people of Greater New Bedford to rally around the long-term preservation of New Bedford Youth Court so that it can continue to serve the youth of our community and spread light to those who need it most. As New Bedford Youth Court stands at the threshold of an uncertain future, we ask local decision makers, the City Council, the School Committee, our state delegation, and the community at-large to take action in supporting this program financially and ideologically.
