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**EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT**

**THE**

**SPOKANE COUNTY JUVENILE COURT**

**CONFERENCE COMMITTEES**

**Spokane County Juvenile Court  
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#### INTRODUCTION

Congratulations on your appointment as a member of a Spokane County Juvenile Court Conference Committee! Your decision to serve your community in this fashion is deeply appreciated by all those aware of the importance of constructively involving citizens in the juvenile justice system. It is our intent to help prepare you for your role as a Conference Committee member through training sessions conducted by professional Juvenile Court staff. Every possible effort will be made to insure that you will feel reasonably capable and comfortable with your ability to participate in the committee process at the completion of training. In addition, you will find that once you actually begin to participate in the committee sessions there will always be a professional staff person available to assist you and the other Conference Committee members with potentially difficult situations.

#### PURPOSE OF THIS BOOKLET

This booklet has been prepared to augment the training you will receive from Juvenile Court staff. It is organized to give you at least a working knowledge of the Juvenile Court and the Conference Committees. You are most welcome to keep it and use it for reference as the need arises during your term in office.

WHAT ARE CONFERENCE COMMITTEES?

Conference Committees are boards of volunteer citizens who meet with selected youth and their parents in cases where the youth have been arrested for a minor crime such as shoplifting, disorderly conduct, etc. Conference Committees are an extension of the Spokane County Juvenile Court, and act only on those cases sent to them by the Court. Their role is to provide guidance and support to families faced with having to deal with a youngster in trouble.

Conference Committee members are not "judges". Families meet with them voluntarily, as an alternative to appearing before the Juvenile Court. Consequently, Committee members neither "judge" nor "sentence" a youngster - they, instead, interview the family and may provide a recommendation that might help the family better deal with the situation.

From this information, would you say that Conference Committee members should try to solve the problems of the families they interview?

YES - turn to page 3.

NO - turn to page 4.

YES      Not really.

Remember, we mentioned that Conference Committees provide guidance and support to families with youngsters in trouble. They do not, however, accept the responsibility for actually solving any of the families' problems. Only the family can do that. All that the Conference Committee can do is help the family solve their problems by suggesting places they might go to get help.

Now turn to page 4 for the correct answer.

NO You're right. You probably realize that nobody else can solve your own problems for you - you have to do it yourself. The same holds true for the Conference Committee. They cannot take care of the problems of the families they see, but they can support the families' efforts to solve their own problems.

Go on to page 5.

### WHY HAVE CONFERENCE COMMITTEES?

The Spokane County Juvenile Court recognizes that active participation by citizens like yourself is necessary to begin to solve youth-related problems in our community. Everyone feels the impact of the juvenile delinquency problem, if not as victims of a crime then at least as taxpayers supporting the governmental systems developed to deal with it. It makes sense then that the total community will benefit if the general citizenry takes an interest in finding ways to slow down delinquency other than relying only on the justice system.

Your decision to offer your services as a Conference Committee member is an excellent example of how citizens can actively participate in this process. During your term in office you will begin to better understand some of the things that contribute to a youngster's decision to commit a law violation. Some of those factors can be prevented with the establishment of improved community services and opportunities, and your Conference Committee may point up such a need in your section of the community. By working with the Sponsoring Group to inform and guide the public, your Committee may ultimately play a role in getting needed services developed.

Another benefit of the Conference Committees is that they impress the youngsters and their families that the entire community, not just the justice system, has a definite interest in their conduct, and that their actions are accountable to all members of the community.

Since the Conference Committees are an extension of the Spokane County Juvenile Court, you should have at least a general idea of the Court's responsibilities and philosophy. The following section will touch on those areas. Pay particular attention to the description of the Court philosophy, because your Conference Committee's activities should also reflect that philosophy. Remember, your role as a Conference Committee member will be to help the families you see solve their own problems - and possibly provide some help in that regard in the form of a recommendation for a certain course of action.

## OVERVIEW OF THE JUVENILE COURT

### RESPONSIBILITIES

The Juvenile Court is a department of the Spokane County Superior Court. It has the responsibility, by law, to deal with those youngsters under age 18 brought to its attention by local law enforcement agencies, social service agencies, parents, or other concerned parties. When a youngster comes to the Court's attention, it is called a referral. Most youngsters are referred to the court after they are arrested for committing a crime (called a delinquency in Juvenile Court), or because they have been neglected or abused by their parents, or have shown that they are beyond their parents' control (both called dependency matters).

Because the Juvenile Court is a court of law, its first responsibility is to insure that the child and parents understand their rights as citizens. Next, the basis for the referral must be examined and determined to be either valid or invalid. Lastly, if the referral is valid, the court may take some action (called a disposition) to try to assist in preventing a recurrence of the behavior resulting in the referral in the first place.

### ORGANIZATION

The Juvenile Court Department is under the control of a Superior Court Judge assigned on a rotating basis each year (the Juvenile Court Judge).

The department is administrated by the Director of Juvenile Court Services. It is divided into two divisions, Probation Services and Detention Center Services.

#### PHILOSOPHY

As a court of law, the Juvenile Court operates on the premise that the best interests of the community, as well as the juvenile, must be considered when taking any action (disposition) on a case. In addition, the Court sees itself as a legal and social assessment agency, and not as a treatment or rehabilitation agency. In other words, the court will attempt to identify those factors which contribute to or influence a child's delinquent or dependent behavior, and then call on the various services in the community to actually help remedy those factors. The court itself will not attempt to directly provide those services or programs. It is the Juvenile Court's belief that the youth, his family, and the community all share in the responsibility for correcting and preventing the factors which contribute to delinquency.

Let's review those key terms again. The answers to each of the blanks in the following statements are on the bottom of the page. Try completing each of the statements before checking the answers.

1. If a youngster is placed on probation by the Juvenile Court Judge, that action or any other decision like it is called a \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Youngsters can be brought to the attention of the Juvenile Court only if they are under the age of \_\_\_\_\_ years.
3. If a youngster commits a crime, he is not called a criminal in Juvenile Court, but rather is referred to as a juvenile \_\_\_\_\_.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ matters in Juvenile Court are such things as child abuse or neglect, runaways, etc.
5. When a youngster comes to the attention of the Juvenile Court for any reason, the incident or reason is called a \_\_\_\_\_.

**Answers:**

1. disposition
2. 18
3. delinquent
4. Dependency
5. referral

WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO OR INFLUENCES DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR?

Most of us have committed some minor infraction or infractions of the law. We have learned that if we choose to act in violation of the law, we risk having certain consequences or sanctions imposed on us because of our behavior. Gradually, we learn to accept responsibility for our actions.

The youngsters you will be talking to are in the process of learning that same thing. They appear before you because they have made a poor decision - a decision to break the law. For most of them, the embarrassment of arrest, and the subsequent discipline from their parents will be consequence enough to assure that they will consider other alternatives before making a similar decision again. Your role in these cases will simply be one of affirming and supporting the family's ability to solve the problem themselves.

In a few other cases, there may be problems in the child's life which could be contributing to the youngster's delinquent behavior. We cannot identify what singularly "causes" a youngster to make a law-violating decision. A number of factors play into it to create a "situation" opportune to a delinquent act. We can, however, identify some of those factors that though not necessarily "cause" delinquent behavior, at least may influence or contribute to a potentially delinquent situation.

For example, a youngster's school performance, involvement in school, church, and community groups and activities, source and amount of income, and relationship with his family and friends all tend to influence and be good indicators of his/her potential for either maintaining socially approved

behavior or committing delinquent behavior. During your training sessions you will be given specific examples of these inter-relationships. In addition, you will receive instruction on how to gain that information from the families your Conference Committee will be seeing, and the kinds of recommendations that might be presented to the families to help them solve any identified problems that may contribute to delinquent behavior.

#### ORGANIZATION OF THE CONFERENCE COMMITTEES

Most Conference Committees have between 9-15 members. A Chairperson is selected from the membership, and is charged with calling and presiding at each meeting. It is also his/her duty to acquaint the Sponsoring Group or other appropriate local officials with the recommendations of the Committee for the betterment of the community. Lastly, the chairperson is responsible for coordinating the attendance at the meetings, and for assigning members into groups of three each called:

Teams. Each team will have the responsibility for actually meeting with the youth and their parents. Approximately two families will be met with, separately, during an evening session.

A Consultant, a member of the professional staff of the Spokane County Juvenile Court, will be assigned to each Conference Committee. He/she will assist each team as needed in dealing with the families and in providing information and recommendations for disposition. The consultant will also be responsible for providing training assistance, and will serve as a liaison between the Conference Committee and the Juvenile Court.

#### AUTHORITY OF CONFERENCE COMMITTEES

The Juvenile Court Conference Committees are recognized extensions of the Spokane County Juvenile Court. Like yourself, all members are appointed to the Committees by the Juvenile Court Judge, and thereby act under his authority.

What Conference Committees Can Do. Referrals to the Committees are sent by the Juvenile Court. The Committee then has the authority to invite parents and children to attend a committee meeting, determine the facts of the case, and if necessary, make recommendations to the family concerning practical solutions to problems and refer the family to community services or facilities to receive help.

What Conference Committees Cannot Do. Although the Committees are an official arm of the Court, they do not have the power to compel a family to attend Committee meetings, nor compel them to follow Committee recommendations.

Recourse. If a family chooses not to attend meetings, the case is sent back to the Juvenile Court for resolution. If a family chooses not to accept the Committee's recommendations, the Committee may invite the family back to discuss the reasons for non-compliance. If it appears the family simply refuses without apparent valid reason to comply, the Committee may send the case back to the Juvenile Court for resolution.

Obviously, since your Conference Committee will be meeting with families in lieu of their need to appear before Juvenile Court, it is crucial that you fully understand both the scope and the limitations of your authority. The following exercise is designed to help you solidify your understanding of this area:

Following a conference with a boy and his parents one evening, your team has decided that your recommendation to the family will be that the youngster repay the victim for financial losses of items stolen by the youth. When you present this recommendation to the family, the youngster retorts: "I'm not gonna pay for those things!" Before you have a chance to respond, the boy's father replies: "My son's right! He doesn't have to pay that guy back just 'cause you said so".

What should your response be?

- a. Apologize for suggesting that particular recommendation.
- b. Tell the family that you will terminate the interview because they challenged your authority, and that you will recommend to Juvenile Court that their son be locked up for refusing to cooperate.
- c. Challenge the father to a fistfight.
- d. Reiterate that the recommendation is presented to assist the youngster in better understanding his responsibility in the incident, and that it is not given as a sentence for the youngster.
  - (a) turn to page 15.
  - (b) turn to page 16.
  - (c) turn to page 17.
  - (d) turn to page 18.

- (a) Maybe you should also apologize for the youth's apprehension for the offense in the first place!

You don't have anything to apologize for - the youngster got himself in trouble for deciding to commit a delinquent act. You are there as citizens offering some guidance and support to the family faced with dealing with a younger member in trouble. Your recommendation is only given to illustrate the youngster's responsibility in all this.

The correct response is d. Please turn to page 18.

(b) Wait a minute! they may have challenged your authority, but you're not there to act in a judicial capacity. You're there to offer some guidance to the family if they are willing to accept it. Besides, to tell the family you will recommend that the youth be locked up will be seen by them as a threat, and will only succeed in getting the family more defensive than they already are. It is best in this instance to respond in a fashion similar to selection (d). Please turn to page 18.

(c) How's your medical insurance?

No matter how angry you may feel because of a family's response or attitude, a physical confrontation is obviously not the way to handle it. If you would like some suggestions on how to handle anger in a constructive fashion, jot down a reminder to yourself to bring it up during the upcoming training sessions.

(d) Correct. You should also explain to the family that the recommendation must be mutually approved by all parties (child, parents, and team members) to be acceptable, and that if they wish to disagree with it the issue should be settled between them and an official of the Juvenile Court.

#### TERMS OF OFFICE

Appointments are made for terms of one to two years. The terms are staggered to assure that each Conference Committee always has a "core" representation of experienced members.

#### ROLE OF THE SPONSORING GROUP

Each Conference Committee is "sponsored" by a local group or organization.

As the committees are a community service, most of them are sponsored by service-oriented groups. The Sponsoring Groups serve as a vital "link" between the committees and the Spokane community. Conference Committee chairpersons periodically meet with representatives of their respective Sponsoring Groups to relay information on the operations and observations of the committees. Consequently, Sponsoring Groups become aware of the needs of youth in the Spokane area, and through that awareness they may ultimately contribute to or influence the development of resources designed to meet those needs.

Sponsoring Groups also play a more tangible role by assisting in the recruitment and nomination of Conference Committee members, providing the services of committee secretaries, finding locations to hold the conferences, and providing financial assistance for committee correspondence.

#### FREQUENCY AND DURATION OF MEETINGS

Regularly scheduled meetings are held on a selected evening of the week, and at such other times as called by the Chairperson. Most Conference Committees meet bi-monthly for about a three-hour period, commencing at approximately 7:00 p.m.

#### MEETING PLACE - JURISDICTIONAL BOUNDARIES

A key benefit of the Conference Committees is that each is composed of citizens residing in a particular area, and each serves families also residing within that area. As such, they take on the role of "neighbor helping neighbor".

Because of this unique feature, Conference Committee meetings are held at locations within the boundaries served by each respective committee.

Your committee's Sponsoring Group has located a building where your committee will hold its conferences with families, and you will receive its address from your committee chairperson.

#### CONFERENCE PROCEDURE

Soon after you arrive for your Conference Committee meeting, your chairperson will assign you and two of your Committee colleagues to a team. He/she will also assign the two or three cases that your team will be dealing with that evening. You and your team members will then take the case files and move to an area of the building where the conferences will be held.

The case files will include the police arrest reports on the youngsters referred to your committee. The police arrest reports are the narrative and description of the offense resulting in the youngster's referral. Your team should review these prior to holding the actual conferences.

Finally you and your team members will be ready to call in the family and begin the first conference. Obviously, the conferences with families are the heart and soul of the Conference Committee procedure, so the following tips may be helpful in assuring it will be a constructive experience for both you and the family:

1. You can probably expect the family to be somewhat nervous and apprehensive, so the first few minutes should be spent trying to help the family feel comfortable. The team members should introduce themselves and explain the purpose of the conference committee.
  
2. Next the family should be made aware of their rights, and their option to handle the case through the Juvenile Court.

3. The family should then be asked whether they wish to proceed with the conference.

4. If they do, the team should inquire about the offense and clarify the youngster's role in the offense. Remember, if the youngster denies that he/she was involved, the case must be returned to the Juvenile Court.

5. If the child admits his/her responsibility with the offense, the team should then continue by interviewing the child and parents separately.

6. To attempt to find problems which may be contributing to the youngster's decision to commit a law violation, information should be gathered regarding the youngster's school performance, family, friends, etc. A more concise interview guide for team members follows this section.

7. Following the interviews, the family should be asked to retreat to the waiting area while you and your team members discuss a recommendation for a disposition.

CONFERENCE COMMITTEE INTERVIEW OUTLINE

The following is a suggested outline for a Juvenile Court Conference Committee interview.

I. Explain purpose of Conference Committee:

- A. Community service provided to families as an alternative to official Juvenile Court action.
- B. Members are volunteer citizens, screened, appointed by, and acting under the instruction of the Juvenile Court Judge.

II. Explain conference procedure:

- A. Separately interview the parents and child to attempt to gain understanding of problems influencing delinquency.
- B. Committee will discuss possible recommendation without family present.
- C. In presence of family the chosen recommendations will be presented.

III. Explain rights of family:

- A. Right to be represented by an attorney.
- B. Right to have their case heard in Juvenile Court, instead of by the Conference Committee.
- C. Right not to agree with Committee recommendations, and thus have case handled by Juvenile Court.

IV. Determine if family wishes to continue with conference.

V. Clarify the child's role in the offense.

- A. Clear up questions anyone may have about issues like damage done, stolen articles unrecovered, etc.

VI. Proceed by interviewing parents and child separately.

VII. Gather information in the following areas. Keep the interview as factual as possible and avoid the tendency to inquire about feelings, attitudes, etc.

A. School

1. Has the child ever been held back a grade?
2. Does the Child miss more than four days an academic quarter?
3. Does the child have at least a "C" grade average?
4. Does the child participate in sports or other school activities?

B. Other activities

1. Does the child have a hobby?
2. Does the child attend church at least monthly?
3. Does the child belong to any outside-of-school organization?

C. Finances

1. Does the child have an allowance or other income?
2. Is the child responsible for debts such as restitution, school fees, etc.?

D. Family and friends

1. What is the relationship between parents and child like?
2. Between child and his/her brothers and sisters?
3. Between child and his/her other relatives?
4. Do the child's friends contribute to his/her delinquency?

VIII. Without family present, discuss information obtained and formulate a recommendation.

IX. Present the recommendation to the family and explain why the Committee thinks it would be helpful.

X. Invite questions, ideas, and opinions from the child and parents about the recommendation.

XI. Provide the child and parents with the necessary information to carry out any recommendations given.

XII. Last, but very important, affirm your confidence in the family's ability to solve their problems, if any.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISPOSITION

If you will recall, we have stressed that the Conference Committees are only authorized to invite families to participate in the conference, and if deemed helpful, to subsequently recommend a certain course of action to the youngster and/or his parents. We have also mentioned that the conference is the "heart and soul" of the committee's activities. Conference committee members, therefore, should make a recommendation based on the results of the conference. It will not be necessary in all cases that teams make recommendations to each family. In many cases it will be apparent that the family is capable of taking care of the matter without needing outside help or guidance. In other cases, team members may note certain situations existing that could contribute to delinquency, (e.g., a delinquent-prone peer group, lack of parental discipline, etc.) and the team may want to recommend that a family seek specific services from a local agency. In cases involving property damage or loss, the team may wish to arrange for the youth to make restitution.

During your training sessions, the recommendation alternatives open to Conference Committees will be covered in greater detail. In addition, the professional consultant to your Committee will always be available to assist you and your fellow Committee members with formulating conference recommendations.

**END**