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Young offenders face victims

The goal of accountability circles is to have juvenile criminals mend fences with their victims and come up with an appropriate punishment for the crime.

BY BRIAN CALLAWAY
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RICHLAND — The area's juvenile criminals might soon escape a date with a judge for their crimes. Instead, they may have to face their victims.

Young offenders could be siphoned out of the criminal justice system to participate in accountability circles, a process taught to a group of Richland police, area school officials and concerned citizens last week.

The circles allow crime victims to confront offenders, said Stuart Woods, chief of the township's police department. This allows victims to gain a sense of closure, and gives criminals insight into how their deeds affect people.

"We don't live in a vacuum," he said. "Everything we do impacts somebody else, and this process helps people understand that."

Woods said his department would begin referring youths who had committed offenses such as shoplifting or vandalism into accountability circles, as long as the victims consent.

A facilitator would then coordinate a discussion between the criminal and the victims in the hope that the parties could begin to mend fences and come up with an appropriate punishment for the crime.

The participants would then sign a contract about their resolution,

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Lee Rush, executive director of justCommunity Inc.

and as long as it is completed, the offender would not have a criminal record.

Lee Rush, executive director of the Quakertown-based service group justCommunity Inc., which sponsored the accountability circle seminar along with Woods, said the resolutions to the circles are often productive for all participants.

He said he'd been involved in one circle in which two boys had started a fire near a housing development.

During the circle, he said, the residents of the subdivision made the boys see the potential consequences of their actions, and the boys agreed to clean up the area damaged by the fire and plant grass and trees.

This allowed not only for a cleanup, he said, but also an opportunity for the residents to see the boys in a more positive light.

"The outcomes can be as creative as the people involved," he said.

Woods said the program would be beneficial in this area because it leads to higher victim satisfaction, is less damaging to the criminal and could lower incidences of repeated criminal activity by each offender.



Staff photo by Rich Ken

Richland Township Police Chief Stuart Woods listens as H. Lee Rush of justCommunity Inc. discusses accountability circles, in which offenders face their victims.