

Putnam County Teen Court Manual



Teen Volunteer Guide

Welcome & Program Overview

Welcome to the Putnam County Teen Court Program, we are glad you are a part of the team. By being a part of Teen Court, you are the leaders and role models of our program. Therefore, it is important to understand the responsibilities and limitations of the program.

Teen Court is a voluntary diversion program designed to hold youth accountable for their actions while educating them about the justice system and encouraging positive decision-making. Eligible youth respondents accept responsibility for their offense and agree to have their case heard by a jury of their peers.

Teen Court emphasizes restorative justice rather than punishment. The goal is to help youth understand the impact of their actions, repair harm when possible, and develop skills that support law-abiding behavior.

Teen Court relies on teen volunteers, like yourself, to facilitate this process. Through participation, youth volunteers gain leadership experience, public speaking skills, confidence, and a deeper understanding of civic responsibility.

The Teen Court staff thanks you for your dedication to our program. We hope that your experience as a volunteer with us becomes a valuable resource in other areas of your lives. We always welcome your suggestions concerning Teen Court or questions about the program.

Please take some time to read over this manual. This manual should serve as a resource for you.

Teen Court Volunteer Criteria

- Age 13-18.
- In good academic standing.
- Prepared to abide by the rules of the program.
- Willing to sign, respect and abide by the Oath of Confidentiality.
- Dressed appropriately.
- Able to demonstrate the ability to treat each case individually with objectivity and without prejudice.
- Willing to communicate with people and to work in a group process.
- Responsible for behaving maturely during all phases of your participation.
- Sensitive to socioeconomic, cultural, racial and religious differences between Teen Court participants.
- Serious about Teen Court at all times and businesslike in your conduct while court is in session.
- Alert, attentive, and enthusiastic in your work.
- Respectful to all participants and the Court.
- Able to abide by the Rules of Decorum set by the Court.

Teen Court Structure

Teen Court operates in a structured courtroom setting that mirrors the traditional justice system. Hearings are overseen by a trained adult judge, attorney, or Teen Court staff member. Youth volunteers serve in courtroom roles including teen attorneys, jurors, bailiffs, and clerks. Participation in Teen Court requires that the defendant admit responsibility for the offense prior to the hearing. The purpose of the hearing is not to determine guilt, but to determine fair and appropriate sanctions that promote accountability and growth. This process offers youth an alternative to the formal justice system.

Teen Court is not meant to handle violent or felony cases, but instead to give first-time offenders and those who committed misdemeanors a chance to take responsibility and avoid a criminal record. Defendant referrals can come from: law enforcement officers, school administrators, and parent referrals.

Courtroom Etiquette

The significance and seriousness of the courtroom is based on **RESPECT**:

- Respect your surroundings.
- Refrain from sitting on furniture or putting your feet on the furniture.
- Refrain from using profanity of any kind in and around the courthouse.
- Refrain from eating, drinking or chewing gum in the Courtroom.
- Respect the room/space when another attorney is conducting his or her interview.
- Respect your fellow attorneys, clients and family members.
- Be willing to work as a team and help the other teen volunteers.

Roles & Responsibilities

Teen Attorneys – Prosecutor and Defense Attorney

Teen Attorneys represent either the community (State) or the defendant. Their responsibilities include preparing questions, conducting respectful examinations, and delivering closing statements. Teen Attorneys must act professionally and always follow courtroom protocol.

Jurors

Jurors listen attentively to the case and all facts presented. Jurors deliberate as a group to determine fair, meaningful, and restorative sanctions for the defendant.

Clerk

The Clerk is responsible for maintaining courtroom records, tracking attendance, and documenting sanctions as directed by the jury and judge.

Bailiff

The Bailiff maintains order in the Courtroom, swears in witnesses/jurors, manages proceedings, and ensures participants follow courtroom rules.

Code of Conduct & Expectations

All Teen Court participants are expected to conduct themselves in a professional, respectful, and responsible manner at all times. Teen Court is an educational program and a representation of the justice system.

Participants must:

- Treat all individuals with respect and fairness
- Follow directions from judges, staff, and coordinators
- Use appropriate language at all times
- Arrive on time and prepared
- Maintain professionalism inside and outside the courtroom

Failure to follow the Code of Conduct may result in disciplinary action, suspension, or removal from the program.

Confidentiality & Ethics

All Teen Court proceedings are confidential. Information regarding cases, respondents, families, or sanctions may not be discussed outside of official Teen Court activities. Media access to Teen Court proceedings is prohibited.

Participants must not share case details with friends, classmates, or on social media. Ethical conduct is required at all times. Any breach of confidentiality or ethical standards may result in immediate dismissal from the program.

Please do not work or participate in a case when you know the defendant. You will still be eligible to receive your community service hours if you are an observer.

If you have a question about whether or not you should be working on a case, please see a Teen Court staff member.

Safety & Behavior Guidelines

Safety is a priority in all Teen Court activities. Disruptive, disrespectful, or unsafe behavior will not be tolerated.

Participants must:

- Follow facility rules
- Respect personal boundaries
- Comply with instructions from staff
- Report safety concerns immediately

Training Requirements – All Roles

All youth volunteers must complete mandatory training before participating in Teen Court proceedings. Training ensures that participants understand courtroom roles, procedures, ethics, and expectations.

Training topics may include:

- Overview of Teen Court
- Courtroom roles and responsibilities
- Questioning and communication skills
- Confidentiality and ethics
- Professional behavior and conduct

Additional training may be required throughout the year depending on the role chosen by the teen. Attorneys are required to observe and train prior to serving.

Attendance & Participation Policies

Regular attendance is required for all Teen Court volunteers. Participants must attend scheduled training sessions and court hearings as assigned.

If a participant is unable to attend, advance notice must be provided to the Teen Court staff. Excessive absences, tardiness, or lack of participation may result in suspension or removal from the program.

You must appear for Teen Court on time. Tardiness is not tolerated in the Court system. You are expected to communicate with the Teen Court staff if there will be an issue with attendance.

Dress Code

How Teen Court participants represent themselves is very important. They must exhibit respect for the court and take the process seriously. Therefore, teen volunteers are expected to be professional and use good judgment in their choice of attire. Teen Court will refuse jury or other court duty to persons who do not abide by proper dress code. **We do not expect you to buy a new wardrobe.** If you need assistance with business attire, please see a Teen Court staff member.

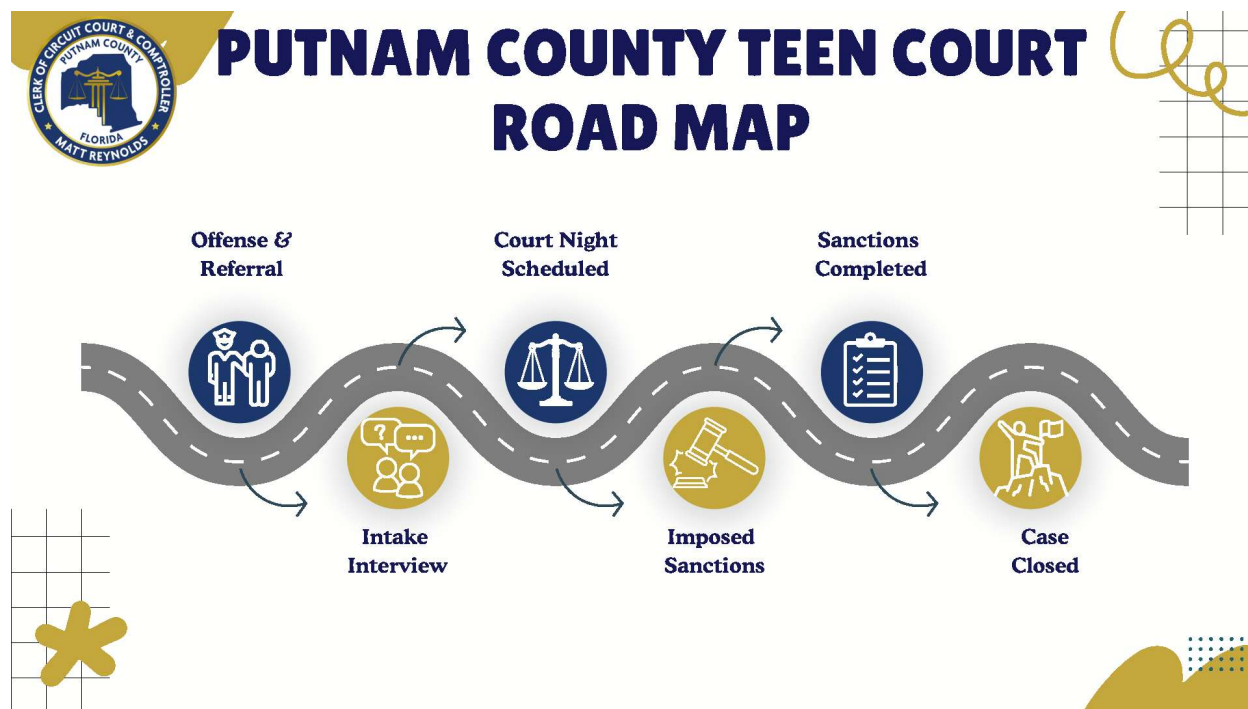
All teen officers of the court must wear appropriate business attire.

The following are never allowed in the courtroom:

- Caps, hats, bandanas, or sunglasses
- T-shirts or other clothing with inappropriate pictures or language
- Bare midriff shirts or spaghetti strap or strapless halters
- Beach wear
- Shorts
- Ripped or torn clothing
- Visible undergarments

- Hooded sweatshirts
- Mini skirts
- Flip-flops or slides

Case Flow & Hearing Process



Cases are referred to Teen Court by local law enforcement, school administrators, or parent referrals. Participation requires consent from the respondent and their parent or guardian.

Once referred, the case is reviewed by a Teen Court staff member. If the offense is a qualifying offense, an intake interview with the defendant and their parent or guardian is scheduled.

Following the intake interview, the defendant is scheduled for a Teen Court hearing.

The case is heard by a Teen Court jury, presented by teen attorneys. After the hearing, sanctions are assigned by the jury. The defendant is given a deadline to complete all sanctions.

Upon successful completion, the case is closed and reported as completed. If the defendant complies and completes all the sanctions, no record follows the teen.

Failure to complete sanctions may result in the case being returned to the referring authority.

Hearing Procedure is as follows:

- Call to order
- Introduction of parties
- Opening statements
- Questioning of the defendant

- Jury deliberation
- Announcement of sanctions

Prosecutor Responsibilities

The Teen Court Prosecutor represents the interests of the community during Teen Court proceedings. The Prosecutor is responsible for reviewing the case information, preparing thoughtful and appropriate questions for the respondent, and conducting a respectful examination during the hearing. Serving as the Prosecutor means that you will be representing the State. Be prepared - you will not be interviewing the defendant; you will only be using the information provided to prepare.

The Prosecutor's role is not to punish, but to help the jury understand the circumstances of the offense, the impact on the community, and any prior history relevant to determining fair and restorative sanctions. The Prosecutor must act professionally at all times, follow courtroom procedures, and ensure that questioning remains respectful, appropriate, and consistent with Teen Court values.

Defense Attorney Responsibilities

The Teen Court Defense Attorney represents the defendant during Teen Court proceedings. The Defense Attorney is responsible for meeting with the respondent prior to the hearing, when possible, to understand the circumstances of the offense and the respondent's background. This can be a trying time for the Defendant and his/her parent(s)/guardian(s).

Most youth who appear in Teen Court are experiencing court for the first time. You are the first young person to meet them. Introduce yourself and your co-counsel (if any), not only to the Defendant, but also to the family. Shake hands with all of them and make them feel welcome. Explain that you are taking the Defendant to go over a few things with them before your court presentation. When you return, ask if the parent(s)/guardian(s) have questions. Do not hesitate to ask for assistance from any Teen Court staff member. Remember your role is an important part of what makes Teen Court successful. Teen Court is based on peers helping peers get through a difficult situation

During the hearing, the Defense Attorney asks questions that allow the respondent to explain their actions, take responsibility, and highlight positive qualities, achievements, or efforts toward improvement. The Defense Attorney advocates for fair, reasonable, and constructive sanctions while maintaining honesty and professionalism. At all times, the Defense Attorney must follow courtroom procedures, treat all participants with respect, and uphold the principles of integrity, confidentiality, and restorative justice.

Courtroom Demeanor – All Roles

Teen Court volunteers in all roles must conduct themselves properly throughout the proceeding. The following information is mostly for the Teen Attorneys in both the Prosecutor and Defense Attorney roles.

- Keep your distance from the jury box and witness stand.
- Always rise when addressing the Court.
- Begin by asking “May it please the Court.”
- If opposing counsel makes an objection, stop and let the Judge make a ruling.
- Always address the Court, the Jury or the Defendant. Never argue with opposing counsel.
- You can be firm but you must be polite.
- Maintain a calm, cool, and collected appearance at all times.
- Hold the eye of the defendant.
- Roll with the punches – if you get an unexpected answer, ask another question without showing the impact of the previous answer.
- Let the jury keep up with the testimony.
- Listen to the answers given.

Improper Conduct:

- Do not walk around while questioning the defendant, unless approved by the Judge.
- Do not lean or slouch.
- Never show surprise.
- Never show anger.
- Never turn your back on the Court.
- Never show disrespect for the Court, the opposing counsel, clients, the jury, spectators, and Teen Court administrators and staff.

Case Presentation – Attorneys Only

- Always stand when you are addressing the judge/presiding attorney.
- Always ask permission to proceed by beginning with “May it please the Court.”
- Always ask permission to adjust the podium unless the Judge gives you permission to do so ahead of time.
- Always introduce yourself and whom you represent. Defense counsel introduces their clients by name. Prosecutors state that they represent the State of Florida in the Teen Court proceeding.
- Speak loudly and clearly.
- Speak slowly and deliberately.
- ALWAYS RISE when the jury enters and exits the courtroom and when the verdict is read.
- Address the jury respectfully; i.e. “Ladies and Gentleman of the Jury.”
- Think about how the jury will react to the Defendant.

- DO NOT discuss the case presentation and/or verdict in the hall or public area.
- Do not speak to the jury members about the case.
- Always address and maintain eye contact with the jury, judge, or defendant.
- Do not sound sarcastic, demeaning, or aggressive.
- Address your objections and arguments to the judge, not opposing counsel.
- Let the Defendant speak; you are not the witness; the defendant is.
- **BE PREPARED!** Show up for court as early as possible so that you can prepare your case. Prosecutors should review all documents in the case. Defense attorneys should spend as much time with their clients as possible, asking questions and taking notes on information found on the Summary Sheet or Incident Report.
- **EMBRACE THE PROCESS!**

Opening Statements – Attorneys Only

Opening Statements are the opportunity to introduce the case to the jury so that the jury knows what you intend to prove.

- The opening statement is the first time you are permitted to address the jury in open court. It is your first opportunity to tell the jury what the case is all about. It should be carefully planned, developed, and delivered. Remember this is the first time the jury hears anything about the case other than when the judge tells them about the charge against the defendant.
- The opening statement should be short and clear, forceful (but not argumentative) and positive. It is a roadmap for the jury to follow during the case. Tell your client's story in a logical, precise fashion, giving a chronological outline of facts, with emphasis on the important ones. Explain the prosecution's contention. Be brief and only state as much as necessary to clarify your side. To be convincing, an opening statement must be clear. Use simple sentence structure and vocabulary.
- Prosecutors should always refer to "the defendant." Explain the offense with which the defendant has been charged and the laws that have been broken. Be careful about making assumptions about whether the defendant is remorseful, etc., because the defendant has not yet testified.
- Defense attorneys should personalize their client; refer to the defendant as "Mr.," or "Ms.," or "my client." State the background of your defendant and introduce him/her to the jury. Also give information about how the defendant has been punished to date, if his/her grades are good, or if he/she has gone to counseling since the incident. Show the defendant's positive attributes. Do not reveal too much of the defendant's personal history. This could become very embarrassing for everyone.
- **Organizing the Opening Statement** – the following outline may be useful in organizing your opening statement:
 - (1) Introduction
 - (2) Parties
 - (3) Scene of crime
 - (4) Circumstances of crime

- (5) Date and time
- (6) What happened
- (7) Basis of guilt (Prosecution)
- (8) Extenuating and mitigating circumstances (Defense)
- This is not the place to argue the case. Arguments come at the end of the hearing and are improper in opening statements. One of the best ways to determine if you are about to cross the line if you are:
 - Not sticking to the facts
 - Telling the jury they must
 - Using the words “I think”
- Present the case factually and logically from your client’s point of view. Be careful not to misstate any facts or exaggerate. If you do not think you can prove a fact, then do not talk about it now. If you do talk about it and cannot prove it, your opponent (who is also reading this guide) will probably point this out in his/her closing argument and make your arguments seem untrue. This is your opportunity to present the weaknesses in their best light before the opponent has a chance to use them against you.
- **Conclusion of the Opening Statement:**
 - For the Prosecution: “These are things the prosecution will offer in proof by testimony of the defendant, and I am sure you will agree that he/she should receive a (strong, harsh, maximum) sentence.”
 - For the Defense: “These are things which (the Defendant’s name) will offer in proof of his/her case. When the Defendant completes his/her testimony, I am sure you will impose a (lenient, light, minimum) sentence.”
- **Presentation:** Be natural, firm, and confident. Speak conversationally, but with correct grammar and pronunciation. Look at the jury as much as possible, though you can refer to your notes as needed.
- **DO:**
 - Tell just enough of the story to keep the jury’s attention.
 - Arrange the statement in a logical, easy to follow order.
 - Speak sincerely, honestly, confidently, and firmly.
 - Speak to the jury in clear terms.
 - Introduce yourself and whom you represent, either the defendant or the State of Florida.
 - Only introduce information that you will prove in the questioning.
 - Explain the charge and any technicalities that the jury needs to know.
- **DON’T:**
 - Serve as counsel or vote in the ratings if you know the defendant.
 - Argue to the jury.
 - Speculate on what the defendant might say.
 - Belittle the jury or defendant.
 - Present “your” personal opinions.
 - Tell the jury this should not have come to Teen Court or the charge is ridiculous in any way.

Laying the Foundation for Testimony – Attorneys Only

- Narrative Technique: Let the defendant tell his/her story first. If properly prepared, the defendant will need few questions. If an important point is omitted by the defendant, ask specific questions. If that does not work, ask if memory in that area can be refreshed.
- Directive Questions Technique: Use short, direct questions (such as “where were you?”, “who else was there?”, “what was said?”, “when was it said?”). This is used when the defendant is unable to narrate without guidance – tactically advantageous.
- “Why” questions are not permitted. Why something happened should be obvious from other questions.

Direct Examination – Attorneys Only

Direct Examination is the series of questions asked by the defense attorney of any witness called. In Teen Court, the defense always calls only one witness, the defendant. The purpose of this portion of the hearing is to let the defendant speak about what crime he/she has committed, what extenuating circumstances may exist, and how he/she has taken responsibility for his/her actions. Make sure that the defendant speaks loudly enough to be heard by everyone in the courtroom.

Methods for Direct Examination:

- The defense attorney who conducts the direct examination has to use open-ended questions on direct examinations. The defense attorney should ask simple “who, what, when, where, and how” questions, letting the defendant tell a logical story.
- Only ask questions to which you already know the answers. You should know the answers to your questions from information gathered during the defendant interview. Questions should be short and direct.
- Try not to ask yes/no questions. These questions are generally referred to as leading. Leading questions are worded in such a way as to suggest the answer. Rather than asking “Do you feel sorry for what you have done?” ask, “How do you feel about what you have done?” The defendant is forced to explain himself rather than provide a one-word answer. This will sound more sincere.
- Organize logically. The easiest way to get the defendant’s story is to do it chronologically. Start at the beginning, touch all the bases, and finish at the end.
- “Paint” a picture of the scene description first, then action. Let the defendant tell the jury what things looked like so the jury can orient themselves. Once that is done, then you ask, “what happened next?”
- Develop defendant’s background (good grades, athlete, Boy Scout, church volunteer, school club president, etc.). This is especially important for the defense attorney. The answers to the questions you ask consist of the evidence of the case. You need to remember the positive information heard on direct examination in your closing argument to substantiate your request for a light sentence.
- Use pace in describing action. Slow down or speed up the action depending on how it best suits your side. For prosecutors, it would probably be best to slow things down so that

things look calculated and deliberate. Defense attorneys want to speed things up, so they look spontaneous and unpremeditated.

- Use simple language. You want the defendant to understand the question the first time you ask it. Having to explain what a word means, or repeat the questions using simple words, makes you look bad. Also, the words you use are important. Note how the following words/phrases can be used to talk about the same thing and yet convey different thought:
 - How slow were you going?
 - How fast were you going?
 - Did you conceal the item...?
 - Did you hid them in your...?
 - Quickly left the store?
 - Ran from the store?
 - Lied to the police?
 - Afraid to tell the truth?
 - Took the?
 - Stole the?
- Have the defendant explain. If you did not understand what the defendant said, chances are neither did the jury. If they did not, you have lost the war. There is nothing wrong with asking a defendant to explain.
- Listen to the answers. Look interested in what the defendant is saying. If you look bored, the defendant and the jury may well become disinterested.

Cross Examination – Attorneys Only

Cross-examination is a series of questions asked by the prosecuting attorney of the witness, or defendant. The prosecution seeks to challenge the defendant's testimony (if appropriate) to emphasize the severity of the defendant's actions, and to question the defendant's statements of remorse if they are insincere. The prosecutor develops the case with leading questions, seeking yes or no answers. Cross examination is limited only to the facts brought out in the direct examination.

The purpose of cross-examination is to undo the damage of direct examination. You were supposed to be listening during the direct examination for (mostly) two things: (1) objectionable questions or answers, and (2) damaging evidence. (Admissible, or you would have objected at the time).

Methods for Cross Examination:

- Cross-Examination concerns itself with damaging evidence. It is your chance to "put words in someone's mouth", to make them seem confused or less credible, to make the jury forget what "good" stuff (for the other side) came out on direct examination. You can do this by asking leading, close-ended questions, such as:
 - You were at the supermarket that day, weren't you?
 - You took the roast beef, didn't you?
 - You could not have seen Mr. X because you weren't wearing your glasses at the time, isn't that right?

- Never attack the defendant. Always be polite. Avoid sarcasm.
- Never attempt to confuse the defendant.

Redirect/Recross – Attorneys Only

- After direct examination and cross-examination, the defense attorney has the option to redirect the defendant. This is the opportunity for the defense attorney to ask questions about testimony in the cross-examination. The questions asked in the re-direct examination must relate to the testimony of the cross-examination. The evidence rules limit redirect examination to the scope of the cross-examination. The redirect is not the time to ask questions you may have forgotten to ask during the direct examination, unless such questions relate to the cross-examination. As in the direct examination, leading questions are not allowed.
- If the defense attorney chooses to redirect the defendant, then the prosecution may also have the option to recross the defendant. The judge decides whether a recross examination will be heard. Just as the redirect must relate to the cross-examination, so must the recross relate to the redirect. The evidence rules limit recross examination to the scope of the redirect examination. Only ask questions that relate to testimony brought up in the direct. Do not ask the same questions over again.

Objections – Attorneys Only

There are many rules that govern attorneys' conduct and questions in the courtroom. When one of these rules is broken, it is often appropriate to make an objection. There are rules governing objections, too. Objections protect the defendant from harassment and unfair tactics, and protect the prosecution from the defendant's presentation of inadmissible evidence.

- **When to Object:**
 - Object as soon as you hear the objectionable questions. Stand up quickly and quietly.
 - If the question is answered before you can stand object, object and then move to strike the answer for the appropriate reason.
- **How to Object:**
 - State the objection firmly in a loud voice. Do not wait for the defendant to finish answering before objection. State your objection like this: "Objection, your honor. The prosecution/defense is _____."
 - Do not be dramatic when standing up or voicing your objection.
 - Make a specific objection such as "leading" or "asked and answered". Do not object without indicating what the objection is.
 - Do not argue with the opposing counsel. If necessary, the judge will request an explanation as to what you are objecting.
 - If the objection is overruled, do not argue with the judge. If the objection is sustained, do not thank the judge.
- **Deciding When NOT to Object:**

- There are some reasons when you may not want to object to even if the opposing counsel asks objectionable questions:
 - Repeated objections disrupt the flow of the trial and reduce the credibility of the attorney who repeatedly objects.
 - Objecting may highlight material that you want the jury to overlook, rather than making it go away.
 - The defendant is offering testimony that will actually help your case.

Common Objections & Definitions

- **Ambiguous and/or Unintelligible** – Defendant and or counsel cannot figure out what the question means. It is very important that the question be properly stated so that the defendant will give the correct answer rather than an attempted answer.
- **Argumentative** - The attorneys may not argue to the jury during opening statements. This prevents opposing counsel from badgering the defendant into changing his/her story.
- **Asked and answered** – The same question may not be asked and answered by the same attorney and witness more than once. This should be used to stop repetitive questioning, especially during endless direct examination.
- **Beyond the Scope of the Direct/Re-direct/Cross-examination** – Re-direct examinations must relate only to cross examination, while re-cross examinations must relate only to the re-direct. No new material may be covered after the direct examination.
- **Compound Question** – The question is worded in such a way that multiple answers are needed. This forces the defendant to answer more than one question at a time, whether or not he means to. Example: “Isn’t it true that you were drinking a beer on the beach, and someone said you were harassing the public with name calling?”
- **Facts Not in Evidence** – Traps defendant into affirming the truth of an assumed fact, without his meaning to do so; ex. “Do you know?” and “Have you heard?” questions.
- **Golden Rule** – The attorneys may not put the jury in the place of the defendant with statements such as “Imagine if you were this defendant...” or “Send a message.”
- **Hearsay** – The defendant is testifying based on what he/she heard someone else say as truth for the matter asserted. The testimony is not admissible because the opposing counsel does not have the opportunity to examine the person who made the statement. Note that there are many exceptions to this rule so that hearsay is not always objectionable.
- **Irrelevant** – All testimony must relate directly to the case at hand.
- **Improper Impeachment** – Irrelevant prior bad acts/crime of the defendant may not be brought out in court.
- **Leading** – The defense attorney cannot lead the defendant by asking “yes/no” questions or questions with the answer already in them; for example, “that’s when you saw the officer, right?”
- **Misstatement of the Facts** – The attorney’s question misstates facts already in evidence.
- **Speculation** – Defendant is asked to just guess at the answer.

Closing Arguments – Attorneys Only

The closing argument is the last time you get to speak to the jury. It is the time that you summarize the points that help your side of the case. The purpose of the closing argument is to collect the important facts and expose them to the view of the jury in a logical and unified pattern that will be accepted and believed. This is the last chance to explain to the jury “why my client’s side is right.”

- **Preparation:**

- Do not write out an argument and attempt to memorize it. You should prepare a written outline, possibly using your opening statement as the basis. You should have taken notes during the opposing counsel’s opening statement so that you can point out what opposing counsel has not proven with the evidence.
- For the Prosecution: As a representative of the State, the prosecutor has specific responsibilities. The prosecutor must argue the case. He/she may discuss evidence, the defendant, the defendant’s credibility. He/she may discuss the duties of the jury, the importance of the case, and anything else that is relevant. However, the prosecution must not express personal beliefs as to the guilt of the defendant. The prosecutor may not act as a juror, witness, or mentor. The prosecutor should make a recommendation to the jury that is appropriate and in the States’ interest.
- For the Defense: In his/her closing argument the defense attorney points out weaknesses in the prosecution’s case. Since the defense goes last, be sure to cover potentially damaging statements made by the prosecution. Highlight the positive aspects of the defendant’s testimony including the defendant’s remorse for the offense, important extenuating punishment the defendant received at home or school, community activity, and character. You should make a recommendation to the jury that is appropriate and in the defendant’s best interest.

- **Closing Argument Content:**

- Have logical structure. Refresh the jury’s mind as to what happened by reciting the facts of the case. Start at the beginning and end at the end.
- Argue the facts but weave instructions into the facts. Let the facts convince the jury that the sentence you are requesting is the one they should return. Avoid personal opinion.
- Use analogies or short stories if appropriate. These should always be short and to the point.
- Do not sound sarcastic, especially when remarking on the credibility of the defendant.
- Use rhetorical questions. The jury has been sitting, listening and thinking all this time. You and your opposing counsel could not possibly have covered and answered everything. Try to think of what questions the jury may still have. Ask the question and then answer it the way you want it answered. Example: “You may be thinking that this is a shame – and you know what – you are right, it is a shame.”
- Argue strengths, not just the opposing counsel’s weaknesses. If you have a good case, argue that!

- Volunteer weaknesses in our own case but try to present them in the best light possible. If there are some facts that are bad for your side, address it to the jury now before your opponent has the chance. You will take the air out of their sails and look better with the jury.
- Do not rely on facts not brought up during questioning. Do not introduce new evidence during the closing argument.
- Do not remark on opposing counsel's personality.
- Respond to each topic introduced during your opening statement.
- The shorter, the better.
- **Post Verdict:**
 - After the jury has reached a verdict and the participating parties re-enter the courtroom, remember that the level of seriousness maintained during the trial should resume.
 - Stay in the courtroom until specifically dismissed by the judge. Defense counsel should rise with the defendant as the verdict is read. Take some time to talk with the defendant and his/her family after the case. In the following weeks, talk with the defendants with whom you worked. Check on their progress and offer to answer questions they might have about Teen Court.
 - Do not talk about the case, especially not in front of the defendant and his/her family once the verdict is read. **Remember that *winning in Teen Court* is helping the defendant understand what acceptable behavior is, not getting what you want from the jury.**

Sanctions & Sentencing Options

Sanctions assigned by the Teen Court jury are intended to be educational, restorative, and developmentally appropriate.

Possible sanctions include:

- Community service hours
- Written essays or reflection papers
- Letters of apology
- Educational classes or workshops
- Jury service in Teen Court
- SWEAT Days

Sanctions are tailored to the offense and the needs of the defendant.

Youth Rights & Responsibilities

Defendants have the right to be treated with dignity, fairness, and respect throughout the Teen Court process. They have the opportunity to speak openly and participate in the hearing.

Defendants are responsible for:

- Completing all assigned sanctions
- Meeting deadlines
- Following program rules
- Maintaining respectful behavior

Common Offenses & Definitions

In Florida, Teen Court typically handles first-time, nonviolent, misdemeanor-level or eligible diversion cases where youth admit responsibility. These include certain property offenses, minor alcohol/tobacco violations, status offenses, and other low-level acts. The statute numbers below reference the relevant sections of the 2024 Florida Statutes.

Battery – Florida Statute § 784.03

Definition: Occurs when a person; (1) actually and intentionally touches or strikes another person against the will of the other; or (2) intentionally causes bodily harm to another person.

Petit Theft – Florida Statute § 812.014

Definition: Taking or using another person's property with the intent to temporarily or permanently deprive them of it.

Under § 812.014, theft of property valued less than \$750 is generally considered petit theft (first-degree misdemeanor), which can be eligible for diversion.

Note: Higher values or prior theft convictions elevate the offense beyond typical Teen Court eligibility.

Providing False Information to a Law Enforcement Officer – Florida Statute § 873.05

Definition: It is illegal to knowingly provide false information to a law enforcement officer about the alleged commission of any crime. The Florida Statute prohibits false information about a crime that has actually occurred. It also prohibits falsely telling law enforcement that a crime has occurred.

Resisting Officer without Violence – Florida Statute § 843.02

Definition: Whoever shall resist, obstruct, or oppose any officer; member of the Parole Commission or any administrative aide or supervisor employed by the commission; county probation officer; parole and probation supervisor; personnel or representative of the Department of Law Enforcement; or other person legally authorized to execute process in the execution of legal process or in the lawful execution of any legal duty, without offering or doing violence to the person of the officer.

Criminal Mischief — Florida Statute § 806.13

Definition:

(1) A person commits the offense of criminal mischief if he or she willfully and maliciously injures or damages by any means any real or personal property belonging to another, including, but not limited to, the placement of graffiti thereon or other acts of vandalism thereto.

(2) Any person who willfully and maliciously defaces, injures, or damages by any means any church, synagogue, mosque, or other place of worship, or any religious article.

(3) Whoever, without the consent of the owner thereof, willfully destroys or substantially damages any public telephone, or telephone cables, wires, fixtures, antennas, amplifiers, or any other apparatus, equipment, or appliances, which destruction or damage renders a public telephone inoperative, or which opens the body of a public telephone.

(4) Any person who willfully and maliciously defaces, injures, or damages by any means a sexually violent predator detention or commitment facility.

Misdemeanor levels here (damage under \$200 or under thresholds established by statute) may be eligible for diversion when appropriate.

Trespass on Property Other than Structure or Conveyance— Florida Statutes (see § 810.08 and § 810.09)

Definition: A person who, without being authorized, licensed, or invited, willfully enters upon or remains in any property other than a structure or conveyance:

(1) As to which notice against entering or remaining is given, either by actual communication to the offender or by posting, fencing, or cultivation.

or (2) If the property is the unenclosed curtilage of a dwelling and the offender enters or remains with the intent to commit an offense thereon, other than the offense of trespass, commits the offense of trespass on property other than a structure or conveyance.

Florida law defines criminal trespass offenses in Chapters 810-810.09, covering unauthorized entry onto land or into structures and curtilage.

Note: Some nonviolent trespass cases may be referred to diversion at the discretion of the State Attorney.

Disruption of a School Function — Florida Statutes § 877.13

Definition: Knowingly disrupting or interfering with the lawful administration or functions of any educational institution, school board, or activity on school board property in this state; to conspire to riot or to engage in any school campus or school function disruption or disturbance which interferes with the educational processes or with the orderly conduct of a school campus, school, or school board function or activity on school board property.

Loitering or Prowling — Florida Statutes § 856.021

Definition: It is unlawful for any person to loiter or prowl in a place, at a time or in a manner not usual for law-abiding individuals, under circumstances that warrant a justifiable and reasonable alarm or immediate concern for the safety of persons or property in the vicinity.

Minor in Possession / Underage Alcohol & Tobacco Laws

While Florida does not have a single statute titled “minor in possession,” under Title XLVI, minors who possess or consume alcohol or tobacco against state laws can be handled as misdemeanor or ordinance violations and are often eligible for diversion through Teen Court.

It is unlawful for any person under the age of 21 years, except a person employed and acting in the scope of her or his employment, to have in her or his possession alcoholic beverages, except that nothing contained in this subsection shall preclude the employment of any person 18 years of age or older in the sale, preparation, or service of alcoholic beverages in licensed premises in any establishment licensed by the Division of Alcoholic Beverages and Tobacco or the Division of Hotels and Restaurants.

- Local ordinances and State Attorney policies determine how these are processed in practice. (Examples: possession of alcohol under age 21; possession of vaping products by minors — local ordinance enforcement varies.)

Possession of Marijuana — Florida Statute § 893.13(6)

Definition: (a) It is unlawful for any person to be in actual or constructive possession of a controlled substance unless such controlled substance was lawfully obtained from a practitioner or pursuant to a valid prescription or order of a practitioner while acting in the course of his or her professional practice or to be in actual or constructive possession of a controlled substance.

(b) If the offense is the possession of not more than 20 grams of cannabis, the person commits a misdemeanor of the first degree. For the purposes of this subsection, “cannabis” does not include the resin extracted from the plants of the genus Cannabis, or any compound manufacture, salt, derivative, mixture, or preparation of such resin.

Obstruction of Justice — Florida Statue § 843

Definition: A criminal activity involving disruption of legal proceedings or officers responsible to maintain law and order. This can be done in the form of trying to hide or destroy evidence related to a trial, bribing a witness, or threatening a law enforcement officer or a witness.

Possession of False I.D. — Florida Statue § 322.212

Definition: (1) It is unlawful for any person to:

(a) Knowingly have in his or her possession or to display any blank, forged, stolen, fictitious, counterfeit, or unlawfully issued driver’s license or identification card or any instrument in the resemblance of a driver’s license or identification card unless possession by such person has been duly authorized by the department.

(b) Knowingly have in his or her possession any instrument in the resemblance of a driver’s license issued by the department or its duly authorized agents or those of any state or jurisdiction issuing licenses recognized in this state for the operation of a motor vehicle.

(c) Knowingly have in his or her possession any instrument in the resemblance of an identification card issued by the department or its duly authorized agents or those of any state or jurisdiction issuing identification cards recognized in this state for the purpose of indicating a person’s true name and age

Status Offenses — Florida Statue § 985.03 Definitions

Definition: Acts that are unlawful only because of the youth’s age — these may include curfew violations, truancy, and similar conduct.

Status offenses are addressed within the Juvenile Justice Code (Chapter 985) and are often eligible for diversion and peer-based resolution.

Important Notes on Eligibility

The offenses described above are typically first-time, nonviolent, misdemeanor level, or status offenses appropriate for diversion and Teen Court referral.

Teen Court does not handle violent felonies, weapons offenses, or serious property crimes that exceed misdemeanor thresholds.

Eligibility is determined by the referring authority and Teen Court staff.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is Teen Court mandatory?

No. Participation is voluntary, but once accepted, full participation is required.

What happens if sanctions are not completed?

Failure to complete sanctions may result in the case being returned to the referring authority.

Can volunteers be removed from the program?

Yes. Volunteers may be removed for violations of program policies or conduct standards.

Contact Information & Resources

Putnam County Teen Court

Putnam County Clerk of Circuit Court and Comptroller's Office

410 St. Johns Avenue

Palatka, Florida 32177

Phone: (386) 326-7600

Email: TeenCourt@putnam-fl.gov

Additional resources, schedules, and updates will be provided during training sessions.