JCP Returns Post-Pandemic to Give Houston Youth a Second Chance

The Juvenile Consequences Partnership program is a partnership among the Houston Bar Association (HBA), the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department, the Harris County District Attorney’s Office, the Harris County Public Defender’s Office, and the Houston Police Department. The goal of the program is to keep juveniles out of the criminal justice system by providing them with an increased understanding of the juvenile justice system. The partnership was founded in September 2007 as an innovative way to address the high number of first-time, non-violent juvenile criminal offenders. The program is offered monthly to eligible juveniles who agree to complete a 90-day or 180-day pre-petition diversion program. In other words, they avoid prosecution for certain crimes and can have their criminal records sealed if they agree to and fulfill certain conditions set by the court.

The Harris County District Attorney’s Office Juvenile Division selects the participants after a thorough review of each juvenile’s police report. A representative from each partner organization speaks for 10 to 15 minutes on the organization’s role in the criminal justice system with an emphasis on juvenile decision-making and the consequences of their decisions. A community member speaks about his experiences with the juvenile system, his certification to stand trial as an adult at age 14, and his 21 years spent in prison. The speakers explain the negative impact that a criminal record can have on the youths in the future, particularly in employment opportunities.

Each month, approximately 100 juveniles are selected to attend the program, along with a parent or guardian. The program partners believe it is vitally important that parents attend so that they know the requirements and what may happen with the case if their child successfully completes the program. Historically, about 88% of the juveniles successfully complete the requirements.

In the spring of 2020, the program was paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The program recommenced in October of 2022. Since then, 397 youths have attended the program. Juveniles who complete the pre-petition diversion program are eligible to have their criminal record sealed. Houston Volunteer Lawyers has a volunteer network of law firms and solo attorneys who file the appropriate documents to seal eligible juvenile records at no cost to the parent or the juvenile. Additionally, in 2015, the HBA and HVL partnered with the University of Houston Law Center’s Juvenile and Children’s Advocacy Project to assist with sealing eligible juvenile records at no cost. The program is a win-win solution for all parties involved, particularly each juvenile who, in essence, gets a second chance to be a productive member of society without the burden of a criminal record.

The program is held one Wednesday each month from 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. at the Harris County Jury Assembly building located at 1201 Congress Street in downtown Houston. For more information regarding the program, contact Bonnie Simmons at the HBA at 346-471-3418 or BonnieS@hba.org.

By DENNIS CARTER

Dennis Carter moderates the JCP program each month.

Dennis Carter is an attorney in Houston. He is a member of the State Bar of Texas and the Texas Bar College. He served as co-chair of the Juvenile Consequences Program in 2018. He is former Air National Guard, former United States Marine Corps Staff Sergeant, and a retired Houston Police lieutenant.