

Inside Girls Court, Washington State's first therapeutic court model for girls

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BY Lila Shroff

Over the past two decades, while juvenile incarceration rates have been decreasing, rates of incarcerated girls have either stayed the same, or increased.

In response, the Kitsap County Girls Court opened in June 2019 as Washington state's first court system providing service just for girls.

A few months ago, I went to see Girls Court in action.

Girls Court is held in a small courtroom in Kitsap County. But despite the judicial setting, the day I visited, the atmosphere was light.

People were chatty, greeting one another with hugs and laughter. A snack cart sat by the door.

"After having, like, a bad day or something, knowing I am going to Girls Court kinda put me in a better mood," said Hannah Rayfield, a 16-year-old who is one of just over 20 girls who have participated in the program since its opening.

"You don't feel like somebody who's on probation," Hannah said. "You feel like someone who is part of a family."

After youth like Hannah are charged and convicted with a crime, they often serve a period of probation. This usually means that they can remain in their communities but under court supervision.

At Girls Court, the probation experience is different.

"It recognizes the needs of girls are very different than the needs of boys," Rachel Sottile said.

Sottile is the president of the Center For Children & Youth Justice (CCYJ), which helped design and implement Girls Court.

"Girls have greater mental health and medical needs and trauma indicators. And when their needs go unmet, they are at a higher risk for recidivating over and over again."

Recidivating is the process of relapsing back into the justice system after an initial encounter. For girls whose needs go unmet, it can become a huge issue.

To address this, the Girls Court operates with a trauma-informed approach. This means understanding the root of the complex issues that land these girls in the justice system in the first place. Sottile said the goal of Girls Court is to understand "what is underneath all

of this trauma and these adverse childhood experiences,” and to provide the girls with a community of people who know and care for them.

From group tie-dye projects to volunteering, Girls Court emphasizes the importance of building relationships with local communities and each other.

And the good news is, it seems to be working.

Girls Court graduate Hannah Rayfield says the experience doesn't fit one's typical idea of the courtroom.

“I see the person that's name being called perk up and just goes up there with a huge smile,” Hannah said. “And then the judge is just like, ‘How was your weekend? Highs and lows?’ And then, I know when I'm sitting there, and I get my name called, I feel my heart drop with excitement.”

When things were financially tough, Hannah would use her own money to pay for bus fares to get to Girls Court. She also told me something that's pretty rare for people involved in the justice system: “My probation officer, she was like a family member to me and everything. Ooh, I miss her so much.”

Sottile described a conversation with a graduating member who was reflecting on her experience: “She said, ‘For the first time in my life, I'm confident with who I am. I've been able to develop trusting relationships that I've never been able to develop in my life, and I have a community that cares about me.’”

Everyone I spoke to, from Rachel to Hannah to the Girls Court team, voiced hope that someday this model would be expanded across the state or nation, or that the model could be adapted into a boy's court, too.

After all, every young person should have the chance to pursue their dreams.

All in-person interviews were conducted prior to the stay-at-home order.

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