

Volunteer Center of Southwest Michigan: Court Referral Program

By Brandon Seng, Communications Manager, Michigan Nonprofit Association

If you break the law in Berrien County, your actions might just land you behind a desk, rather than behind bars. Recently, four young women were referred to the Volunteer Center of Southwest Michigan to perform court ordered community service for the offense of retail fraud. Through the center's Court Referral program, they were placed in an after school tutoring program at the local Salvation Army. Here, the wrongdoers served their community through a homework room, where they assisted elementary age children with their schoolwork. The offenders, ranging from age 12 to 15, all completed their required hours and became inspired to do more. Since their required service ended, all four girls have continued volunteering with the program, excited that they can make a difference.

Stories like this are not unique to the Volunteer Center of Southwest Michigan, as they have had much success in their Court Referral program. This initiative began when the county had a community garden and a few local judges ordered defendants to work in the garden to repay the community for their actions. The Volunteer Center of Southwest Michigan has greatly expanded this program since it was started in 1981.

What started in a small community garden has gained support of all area judges, and 26 years and 261 sites later, the Volunteer Center now services not only all the court cases in Berrien County, but many Federal cases as well. The idea of community service as a means of penalty continues to show a great benefit to the community, and the program has developed to support all juvenile, misdemeanor, and felony cases in the area.

The Court Referral program has grown to 21 times as many clients as they had in their first year and is responsible for 23 times as many service hours as they had in year one. To support this need, Berrien County now has two part-time court referral coordinators, one in South County and one in North County.

Cindy Ehrenberg, who helps run the Court Referral program at the Volunteer Center, describes it as a win-win situation. "The agency wins because it is receiving a service from the offender, while at the same time, providing a placement site for the courts," said Ehrenberg. "Most importantly, the offender wins because he/she is providing constructive work in order to pay back a debt owed to the community."

83 percent of those referred to the program finish their hours of service. The Volunteer Center of Southwest Michigan provides a means for the offenders to pay their debt, and connects them with their community. This connection through service is where true rehabilitation takes place.

For more information about the Court Referral Program in Berrien County, contact:

Cindy Ehrenberg
Court Referral Coordinator
Volunteer Center of Southwest Michigan
St. Joseph Center
605 Pleasant St
St Joseph, MI. 49085
Phone: 269.983.0912
Email: cehrenbergvolctr@qtm.net

Sandy Marietta
Court Referral Coordinator
Volunteer Center of Southwest Michigan
Niles Center
210 E. Main St. Suite 237
Niles, MI. 49120.
Phone: 269.683.5464
Email: cserviceniles@volunteerswmi.org