

Mount Angel decides to drop Peer Court program starting July 1

Police chief cites lack of funding as primary reason

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MOUNT ANGEL – The Mount Angel division of the Silverton/Mount Angel Peer Court will officially pull out of the program beginning July 1, leaving only the Silverton division remaining.

The Peer Court, which deals with first-time misdemeanor, minor offenders, began in November 1999 and is funded partially by a Federal grant and partially by the city.

According to Mount Angel Police Chief Brent Earhart, the city of Mount Angel can no longer afford the \$1,200 it would cost to keep the city's Peer Court afloat.

“We get some funding from a federal grant, and we would do it this year if (the rest of the) funding were available,” Earhart said. “Peer Court is a good program, but this is a matter of economics.”

Earhart stressed that Peer Court is only one of several options that judges in juvenile courts have for consequences to misdemeanor offenders age 12 to 17. Other disciplinary action that judges can impose upon minors includes fines, community service, essays, bench probation or even doing work, such as mowing lawns, for the person he or she has victimized.

The Peer Court is a diversion court, which is sanctioned to do court through the county but operates under its own jurisdiction.

Therefore, in order to be sent to either the Silverton or Mount Angel Peer Courts, a police officer must first cite the minor for a misdemeanor – such as being in possession of tobacco or alcohol or driving without a license before he or she is 16.

If the minor is found guilty, in a juvenile municipal court, the judge has the option of diverting the offender to peer court for sanctioning.

Enter Peer Court Coordinator Cindy Schaeffer.

“I meet with parents and the child to do an intake,” Schaeffer said. “We then set up a court appearance. We have three adult attorneys as judges who oversee protocol, and a jury of eight youth who ask questions and inquire into the situation.”

Schaeffer said that the program's efficacy lies in the fact that Peer Court forces offenders to be accountable for their actions early on, at the first offense.

“The program is very, very successful, and I think the county would be disappointed to see it go,” she said. “They depend on the program to keep the number of kids going through Marion County Juvenile lower.”

But, said Earhart, the Mount Angel Peer Court has “not had a significant success, and it’s not cost-effective.”

According to Earhart, Mount Angel Police stopped sending kids to Peer Court in March 2006, so that they could all be through the system by June 30, the end of the 2005-2006 fiscal year.

If the funding becomes available for the following fiscal year (2007-2008), Earhart said, Mount Angel would be open to continuing its involvement in Peer Court.

In the mean time, though, Schaeffer adds that Peer Court isn’t about punishment.

“We get kids connected to the community or their family,” she said. “It’s about finding the connection and realizing that their actions affect other people.”

The Silverton Peer Court is held at the Council Chambers, upstairs in City Hall.