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Community service intended to teach juveniles important lessons

How do you get a juvenile who has run afoul of a local law to understand the error of his or her way? Have them spend Saturdays picking up litter. At least that's what the Village of Oak Park's Office of Administrative Adjudication hopes will be the case.

Almost every adjudication docket in Oak Park includes at least one or two juveniles who have violated a local ordinance. They may have been picked up by police for being on the streets after curfew, fighting, disturbing the peace or underage drinking. Any of these violations could carry a stiff fine – \$750 to \$1,000.

But in Oak Park, where violations that don't rise to the level of possible jail time are handled administratively rather than through the county circuit court, officials hope community service sentences will be more effective than fines in changing behavior.

"Most of the juveniles who come through the administrative adjudication process aren't really criminals," said Robert Anderson, director of Oak Park's Office of Administrative Adjudication. "And as juveniles, chances are their parents will end up paying the fines. We hope that making them physically work off their penalty will be a more effective deterrent."

Anderson explained that the value of community service goes beyond punishment. He said it also teaches juveniles that there are real consequences for their actions and gives them a sense of accomplishment from doing something that benefits the community.

Typically, community service penalties are handed down in four-hour increments. The more severe the violation, the more hours of community service the administrative law judge may require of the juvenile. Severe cases could face up to 24 hours or more, fulfilled in four-hour increments.

For violations such as underage drinking, Anderson said he hopes to work with organizations such as the Oak Park Township, which may be able to provide referrals for professional assessments and counseling if needed.

Initially, the community service tasks will be limited to duties such as picking up litter and washing municipal vehicles, such as police cars. Community service also could entail helping out at events such as the Fourth of July parade. Anderson said the juveniles will be closely monitored to ensure their safety.

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Community service is not a new option for the adjudication process in Oak Park. But with the demise of the local Volunteer Center, the Village is bringing part of the program in-house where the types of service can be more closely monitored and tasks tied to generating a tangible benefit to the community.

For more information on administrative adjudication in Oak Park, visit www.oak-park.us/adjudication.

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