About Peer Courts

What is a peer court?
A peer court (also known as a youth or teen court) is a diversionary program for youth who have been charged with a misdemeanor offense for the first time. Instead of appearing in front of a Juvenile Court judge or probation officer, the youth respondent appears in a disposition hearing administered by trained youth volunteers. At its core, a peer court is an intervention program based on the concept of restorative justice. Peer courts are common around the county, with several in Georgia.

What are the benefits of a peer court?
- **Reduce recidivism:** Many peer courts report lower recidivism rates for respondents who attend peer court compared to those processed by the juvenile court system.
- **Youth leadership:** Volunteers learn about the law, practice public speaking, serve volunteer hours in their community and develop leadership skills.
- **Cost effective:** A peer court diverts misdemeanor, first-time offenses from juvenile court, which frees up valuable resources to focus on more serious cases.
- **Rapid response:** A peer court can often hear a case faster than a juvenile court. This timely intervention can deter further delinquent behavior.
- **Positive peer pressure:** Youth connect with their peers and see kids volunteering in the community.

How do peer courts operate?
A peer court must have the support of the local Juvenile Court Judge as well as key stakeholders, including the Department of Juvenile Justice and the District Attorney. Faculty at the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development at the University of Georgia have experience starting and administering peer courts. Together, a community and Fanning recruit and train volunteers, and create a process for diverting youth offenders.

Sample six month timeline

**Month 1:** Advisory committee meeting
**Month 2:** Adult volunteer orientation
**Month 3:** Recruit and train youth volunteers
**Month 4:** First hearings!
**Month 5:** Continue to refine hearing process
**Month 6:** Finalize data collection plan

How can I start a peer court?
You can contact Emily Boness, J.D. at boness@fanning.uga.edu or 706-542-1472 to learn more. You can also visit www.athenspeercourt.org for more information about a specific program.