



## Administration

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### Gateway Mock Trial Competition

**OVERVIEW:** The San Bernardino County Public Defender's Office, the Juvenile Court, and the Probation Department created a Mock Trial Program for at-risk youth in custody.

**CHALLENGE** - How do we bring educational activities that promote understanding of the judicial system into a custodial setting for incarcerated youth?: Some of our juvenile clients spend a significant amount of time in custody which severely impacts their access to certain educational opportunities. One such lost opportunity for students in our county is participation in moot court competitions which enable high school students to acquire a working knowledge of our judicial system, develop analytical abilities and communication skills, and gain an understanding of their obligations and responsibilities as participating members of our society. The challenge was, find a way to have such a competition for our incarcerated youth participating in the Gateway Program. The Gateway Program is a 12-18 month in-custody County program for San Bernardino youths who have a serious delinquency history and have exhausted other placement options.

**INNOVATIVE SOLUTION:** For the past three years, the departments have created two mock trial teams comprised of incarcerated youth to compete against each other. Each team was coached by a Deputy Public Defender. Each attorney volunteered their time to go to Juvenile Hall twice a week, for two hours over several months and coach their respective teams. The attorney coaches would review the facts of the fictional case, help the minors develop their roles as attorneys or witnesses, instruct the minors on direct and cross examination during the trial, and work on strategy and presentation styles. It was a learning and training experience for the attorneys as well. The unique aspect of this population was that the kids had experienced the judicial system themselves and provided an unmatched perspective when preparing questions and strategy.

In preparation for the competition, the minors constructed a courtroom within the Juvenile Detention and Assessment Center. Each participant wore a shirt and a tie to truly play the part. Given the custodial setting, the

final competition was not open to the public, but was witnessed by judicial officers, probation administration and staff who were able to observe some amazing role playing, advocacy and enhanced self-confidence from these young men. Over the past three years, Superior Court Judges from our Juvenile Court have served as judges, as well as the Public Defender herself.

**ORIGINALITY - First of its kind:** The Constitutional Rights Foundation sponsors the California state wide mock trial competition in 36 California Counties but *never in a custodial institution*. The Public Defender's office and Probation addressed this gap of opportunity and services to high school students in the Gateway Program. We are not aware of any other county that has done this.

**COST EFFECTIVENESS - No additional cost with immeasurable benefits:** The value of this program is further magnified because it cost no additional monies to the County or participating agencies. Coaching took place during attorneys working hours. Probation staff incorporated coaching sessions and practice into their daily curriculum. Performance attire and incentives were donated by volunteers.

**RESULTS - Young men with a better chance of becoming law abiding and successful members of society:** The amount of time and collaboration with the minors organically created a true mentoring opportunity. Mentoring was not only fostered between the attorneys and the participants but the older minors began coaching the younger minors and the following year's participants. The participants had created such a bond, that the young men continued to contact the attorneys for advice and questions after the end of the competition. Two minors even stated in their graduation speeches that they wanted to pursue a career in law after their experience with the Gateway Mock Trial Competition. The success of this program has drawn minors to participate more than once. We have had over 40 minors participate in the program over the past three years. In addition to the participants, roughly 90 additional in-custody minors were able to observe their peers compete. It is a testament to the program that every minor that participated in the Gateway Mock Trial program successfully completed their 18 month commitment and were released.

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