

## The Juvenile Decency Corps: An Answer to Delinquency

DELINQUENCY is a spiraling problem in many communities throughout the United States, indeed around the world, especially since World War II. Concerned adults everywhere have recognized the seriousness and complexity of the delinquency phenomenon and have initiated many plans and programs to try to prevent and control juvenile delinquency.

Most of these plans and activities have necessarily involved cooperative community action with the school, home, church and other major community agencies sharing in the solution of the problem. One community effort that seems to be contributing to an effective reduction of delinquency has been the creation, in the District of Columbia, of a Juvenile Decency Corps that emphasizes character formation and service to others as its major goals.

The Juvenile Decency Corps was organized during the summer of 1963 as an outgrowth of "Operation Uplift," a community anti-delinquency project of the preceding summer sponsored by the Area

K Board of the Commissioners' Youth Council.<sup>1</sup> "Operation Uplift" brought educational, recreational and enrichment opportunities to approximately two hundred children and adults living in one congested block of a "pocket of poverty" near the central core of our Nation's Capital. The program included tutoring, educational trips, games, arts and crafts, athletics, yard and home beautification, music, dancing and was supervised by fourteen adult volunteers. This project was credited with the fact that there were no delinquency cases in that block during the entire summer of 1962 although this neighborhood heretofore had a high delinquency rate.

<sup>1</sup>In early October 1953, the Commissioners of the District of Columbia organized the Commissioners' Youth Council as the official agency of the D.C. Government for reducing, preventing and controlling juvenile delinquency. The city was divided into 22 natural neighborhood areas and an Area Board, designated by a letter of the alphabet, was organized in each of the areas as an interacting part of the Commissioners' Youth Council. Area K is one of these twenty-two boards. The membership of each Area Board is drawn from all community agencies: school, church, recreation, police, welfare, civic associations, health, other private and public agencies and interested citizens. This is a concerted effort "to study the neighborhood problems of juvenile delinquency and youth conservation and to develop and execute programs consistent with local needs."

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The Area K Board's evaluation of "Operation Uplift" at the end of the year brought into focus two important findings. First, that the children and youth of the community responded eagerly when participating in activities and meeting challenges which were meaningful to them. Second, that there was a need, particularly among the teen-agers, for building personal values, raising social standards, and fostering a sense of community pride.

The high delinquency rate of the area in the past seemed to stem in part from attitudes of irresponsibility, a lack of moral standards and self-respect on the part of many of the youth. Yet, when a summer project such as "Operation Uplift" was undertaken in which the energies and talents of the youngsters were constructively used, delinquent behavior was no longer evident. Furthermore, even within the relatively brief period of the summer vacation months, promising changes occurred in the attitudes as well as behavior of those participating.

The Area K Board realized that a continuation of worthwhile activities was needed to channel the interests and abilities of the young people into constructive pursuits and to bring about those internal changes of personality which make for better persons and better citizens. There was an evident need for a deeper and more permanent commitment of teen-agers to act responsibly in improving themselves and helping create a better community for themselves and others, especially younger children. So, the Juvenile Decency Corps was formed.

A group of thirty-five enthusiastic teen-agers attended the first organizational meeting of the Corps. These youths had served as leaders for the "Operation Uplift" project. It was decided by the group that membership in

the Juvenile Decency Corps would be open to any boy or girl who was ready to accept responsibility for helping to prevent and reduce juvenile delinquency. Persons who joined the JDC would pledge themselves "to obey the law and to be well-behaved at all times." It was also agreed that members would be decent in thought, word and deed and would help others be the same.

It was heartening to the adult sponsors present to see and hear these youngsters, so many from underprivileged neighborhoods, show such maturity and understanding in organizing their group.

"I am glad we have a group like this," said one sixteen-year-old girl. "It gives you a chance to help other kids. When you help other kids, they don't have a chance to get into trouble. When you help them stay out of trouble, you stay out of trouble, too."

The newly elected president spoke earnestly. "This is a good name for our group—Juvenile Decency Corps. Everyone isn't a delinquent. It's good to let people know there are decent teen-agers around as well as delinquent ones. People need to know there is juvenile decency as well as juvenile delinquency."

It was evident that the potentiality for real leadership was present within this group and that the blossoming of that potentiality in the right direction was likely within an organization whose emphasis was on "keeping kids out of trouble," members included.

### Training Program

The newly organized group decided that its initial project would be to prevent and reduce delinquency in the three most crowded and congested blocks in the community where the overall delinquency rate was high. The Corps



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*A young Juvenile Decency Corps leader works with a group of younger children from her neighborhood.*

would concentrate its efforts during the summer of 1963 in helping the 250 children who lived in the three selected blocks "have a good time yet stay out of trouble." Such an ambitious program would require careful planning and preparation, so the assistance of the Area K Board was invited for setting up a special training program.

Shortly thereafter, a training workshop began with adult community leaders giving freely of their time and experience to help the Juvenile Decency Corps launch itself properly and successfully.

Movies, lectures, field trips, role-playing and discussions comprised the training sessions. These activities helped the participants to take both a general and specific look at the problem of delinquency. Causes of delinquency were explored and studied. Finally, ways and means for combating delinquency were presented with opportunities given the participants to work with groups of younger children in recreation activities under the supervision of trained adults. Instruction in arts and crafts, tutoring, games, story-telling, yard and home

beautification was also given. One day each week an educational trip was taken somewhere in the city.

Following the two-hour training period each day, the JDC's returned to the three selected blocks to share what they had learned with the boys and girls who lived in those neighborhoods. In each of the three blocks an interested and mature parent opened his home to the children so they could have a headquarters and so that adult assistance and guidance would be available.

On any summer afternoon one could walk through the community and see JDC members, easily identified by their large, homemade badges, with groups of young boys and girls around them. They could be seen playing games, tutoring, having an arts and crafts class, taking a trip, or conducting some other type of interesting activity for boys and girls. The children were happy with their JDC leaders. One youngster was heard to exclaim to a social worker, "Do you know our JDC leader? We like him. He takes us places and shows us things we didn't know before." When asked about some of the places he had been, the ten-year-old answered, "We've been to the museum and to the monument. Next week we are going to the zoo!" Then, without prompting, he added, "I'm glad we have a JDC!" This last statement seemed to express the feelings of all the children who were benefiting from the efforts and services of JDC members: "I'm glad we have a JDC!"

### Changes in Attitudes

During that first summer of the Juvenile Decency Corps' existence, one of the most significant benefits noted by perceptive adult area board members was the change in attitudes and values of

some of the youth leaders as well as some of the followers. In some respects this change seemed more important than the many constructive activities and projects that were undertaken, though these had significance too.

One of the JDC leaders who emerged as a responsible individual toward the end of the summer began the summer in quite a different way. Jerry, a thirteen-year-old, had a record of destructiveness in the community, committing many acts of vandalism. One of the JDC leaders encouraged Jerry to join a yard beautification group despite Jerry's moods of irritability, low frustration tolerance and a strong undercurrent of hostility. Jerry's latent interest in growing things, plus his admiration of the JDC leader who was a very good athlete, aided him in working with the leader and the group, together with some adult members of a community garden club that assisted the project.

As time went on, Jerry's undesirable characteristics began to appear less and less frequently. By the time of the annual beautification contest at the end of the summer, Jerry had improved considerably and was partially responsible for one of the persons in the contest winning a "Best Yard" prize. Jerry is now a member of the JDC and is helping other boys and girls clean up and beautify some of the front and back yards in the community.

Sylvia, a fourteen-year-old, began as a somewhat reluctant JDC leader but has become one of the strong supporters of the group. When Sylvia's classmate, Florence, joined the JDC, Sylvia came along. With Florence, she was assigned to help a small group of 9- and 10-year-olds with arts and crafts since both girls had talents in this area. Prior to this experience Sylvia had been unsure of herself and had seemed selfish and hostile

toward others, but her success in helping the younger boys and girls have satisfying art experiences seemed to reassure her of her own worth and helped to change her attitude toward others. Her role as guide and teacher gave her a feeling of independence, security and confidence which later was reflected not only in other community activities of her choosing, but in her school work as well.

One of the best team leaders in the JDC is Clifton, a sixteen-year-old. Despite his excellent athletic ability, Clifton was reluctant to join the JDC. He felt insecure and was unwilling to accept responsibility. He did not mind being a member of one of the neighborhood gangs since he was passive and dependent and the gang gave him a sense of security. Easily led and anxious to please, he had become involved in several incidents of delinquency with his gang.

A roving leader employed by the D.C. Recreation Department and member of the Area K Board, whose job was to guide street gangs into lawful activities, saw in Clifton possibilities for wholesome leadership. The roving leader learned that Clifton's father had deserted his mother. Clifton had tried to assume some of the roles of the father, but in attempting to handle tasks beyond his ability, frustration occurred frequently. This weakened his feeling of security and competence, yet he wanted to become capable and self-sufficient.

Within the JDC, Clifton was given responsibilities on the playground that he could handle. As he taught skills and games to groups of children he was encouraged to ask for help whenever he felt he was unable to accomplish a task required or to handle difficult situations. He was constantly reassured about his worth and ability and was not expected

to handle situations beyond his present capabilities. Within a relatively short period of time Clifton became one of the best liked and most admired of the team leaders. Now he is achieving the self-esteem and competency that he needed in meeting responsibilities successfully. He has had a positive influence on members of his gang who are responding to the roving leader's guidance and are assisting in many of the JDC activities.

### An Envious Record

Not only did the JDC leaders and their groups improve themselves in the process of conducting an anti-delinquency program, but they created an enviable record of good citizenship for all the community to admire. By the end of the Juvenile Decency Corps' first summer of operation, the number of cases of delinquent behavior recorded by the police for the three blocks covered by the program was exactly *zero*.

This surprised some of the adult leaders of the community who were interested in the program but were not directly involved. Some of them had their doubts and reservations about the probable success of the Corps. They had asked some questions earlier in the summer which reflected their belief that the influence of the JDC would not be strong enough to counteract the influences of the disadvantaged homes from which many of the children came.

"After all," some of the adults asked, "can children and youth develop self-control and courtesy when their home life is marked daily by cursing, bickering, and fighting? Can a child be expected to respect property when the people at home show complete lack of pride in and respect for their surround-

ings? Can a child learn and practice thrift when he sees the adults in his home spend their meager salaries foolishly and without regard for the future? Can the worth of the individual personality, self-acceptance, self-respect be developed within a child when he comes from a home where he is not respected as a person with dignity and usefulness in his own right? Can children be expected to know and live by a moral code when there is no spiritual teaching available in the home and the church exerts no influence? Can children improve themselves through reading when there are no books, magazines or newspapers in the home?" These were some of the thoughtful questions that were asked.

The Area K Board gave an answer derived from careful reflection and study. It stated that the Juvenile Decency Corps cannot hope to be a panacea for delinquent and unhealthy behavior. However, the JDC can expect to utilize the desire of youth to be useful and to become an active participant in a worthy cause. The Corps will unite boys and girls of all ages with a common purpose: "to help others stay out of trouble and become good citizens." It must provide action that is positive and uplifting, thereby assisting thoughts and feelings to follow in the same direction. The JDC will try to make "service to others" a major goal in the lives of youth and it hopes to develop character in the process. Though the influence of the home may have a negative influence on many boys and girls, the Corps can be a lustrous influence that will reveal new horizons and illuminate the paths to a better life.

The summer's activities of the JDC justified the hopes of Area K Board members in the possibilities of the Corps for preventing and reducing juvenile de-

linquency. With the opening of school, the value of the Corps was further justified as the program continued without interruption. The more mature leaders offered their services for tutoring in after school study centers for elementary school pupils. Others participated in weekend work projects that concentrated on neighborhood beautification. Still others conducted Saturday enrichment and cultural trips for needy neighborhood children.

A group of JDC leaders began work on a *Handbook* designed for teen-agers. In addition to giving the purposes of the Corps, the *Handbook* included sections on these "Standards of Behavior: School Attendance, Dress, Language, Care of Property, Smoking, Dating, Recreation, Health, Safety, Dancing, Driving, Responsibility." Four basic rules were listed which all good JDC's follow: (a) come to meetings whenever called and come on time; (b) behave yourself; (c) always do your best; (d) practice the 7 C's: courtesy, carefulness, cooperation, control, cleanliness, courage, (be) capable.

Another section of the *Handbook* listed ways in which all who wanted to join the JDC could be of service to, for, and with youth. Service *to* youth included all material assistance to youngsters such as the distribution of food and toys to children in hospitals and orphanages. Service *for* youth meant less tangible assistance such as tutoring, supervising recreational activities, and sponsoring trips. Service *with* youth listed activities which required everyone to work together on a common project such as cleaning up and beautifying a house or yard, sharing a hobby, or raising funds.

Many more JDC members carried on other programs that were begun during the summer, making necessary adjust-

ments of time and place. All have continued to give some kind of service and do try to live up to the membership pledge of being decent in thought, word and deed as they help others. Today as the Juvenile Decency Corps nears its first birthday, it is growing in numbers and popularity, attesting to its appeal to youth and—it is hoped—to its worth.

It is important to note that parental support is strong for the Corps. As the JDC becomes known throughout the community through its visible insignia and by word-of-mouth, spread by the youngsters receiving its benefits, the parents of the community show enthusiastic interest. Several parents have volunteered to assist the JDC leaders in many ways. Some parents serve refreshments to arts and crafts and study groups. More have opened their homes for group meetings. Others have donated art materials and other items which children can use.

The Area K Board has helped parents to form clubs among themselves through which they give supportive aid to the JDC: Homemakers Clubs for parents who can meet during the day; Uplift Clubs for parents who can meet at night. This type of action gives notice to the children that there are adults in the neighborhood who are interested in their welfare and really care what they do and what happens to them. These club groups give parents an opportunity to talk about the problems of children and to seek solutions. They gain a deeper understanding of how to cope with certain types of behavior. Coming together this way gives them a feeling of comradeship and affinity with each other in facing similar problems together. Through these clubs parents become aware of what is happening in the community and of how community influences are affecting their children.

The Juvenile Decency Corps is now seen as a very wholesome and beneficial influence in the community. It can be viewed as an organization in which both youth and adults of the community can communicate and cooperate together with mutual trust and respect as they help to prevent and reduce juvenile delinquency. In this interaction the youth learn responsibilities as well as gain privileges. They find for themselves a better image as their talents are used and developed. When others depend upon them and seek them for help and guidance their self-respect is nurtured and strengthened. Their reward has not only been material in some instances, which gives added dignity to their statures as workers in the community, but they have earned the greater prize of inner growth and an inner self of finer quality. With each individual belonging to JDC becoming a better person, a better citizen, the numbers of delinquents—both actual and potential—decline. As these improved individuals interact with others, the quality of the total group is enhanced by their presence and the possibilities of delinquency are reduced. Thus the Juvenile Decency Corps does its part in helping juvenile delinquency fade. In its place emerges a new goal and direction: juvenile decency.

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