



## **Judicial Branch of Arizona in Maricopa County**

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### **Virtual Life Skills and Internal Strength Classes Offered for Youth**

*Classes help youth participating in Court Diversion Program with coping skills*

PHOENIX (October 27, 2021) – The Diversion Unit at Juvenile Probation, part of the Judicial Branch of Arizona in Maricopa County, is offering two new distance learning classes for youth focused on helping them cope with feelings of stress and anxiety.

During the pandemic, all in-person classes were canceled including many classes that were provided by community partners. As a result, the Juvenile Probation department had a need to still hold youth accountable and engage them in opportunities for growth and success. According to Diversion Director Charlsie Cordova, the ongoing pandemic has elevated the presenting issues of anxiety, stress, and other well-being concerns for many youths including those referred to the Juvenile Court. The creation of a virtual class allowed the department to address these issues conveniently while keeping everyone safe during a health crisis.

“The topics covered in both our Life Skills and Internal Strengths classes were chosen to help youth increase their emotional intelligence skills by providing information and education as well as opportunities for practicing the skills discussed,” said Juvenile Probation Officer Jill Lopez. “Our classes provide an introduction into these essential life skills.”

The virtual Life Skills class concentrates on understanding stress, anxiety, thinking traps and anger while providing coping skills. The Internal Strengths class focuses on emotions, feelings, and anger while providing coping skills. The virtual classes were first conducted in April 2021 and since that date, a total of 88 youth have participated.

“One thing I liked about the class is that I was able to be myself and that the teacher actually talked to me,” said one youth in Diversion who took the class. “I learned a few things that will help me, and I would recommend the class.”

Diversion is a voluntary process, offered and authorized in partnership with the Maricopa County Attorney’s Office. Youth referred for most misdemeanor offenses, miscellaneous city code violations and other types of non-felony matters without extensive referral histories are typically eligible. Over the past five years, on average, half of all youth are handled through the Diversion process with the vast majority (88%) of assigned consequences being successfully completed. Juvenile probation officers interview eligible youth and parents to ensure the youth is willing to take responsibility for their actions

through various youth appropriate consequences. This process allows for an efficient, timely and appropriate resolution of the matter while avoiding a more prolonged and formal court process. The 1 ½ hour virtual classes are offered two days per week and are facilitated by two officers who have more than 20 years of experience with training in adolescent brain development and youth mental health issues.

“One thing I learned in class is coping mechanisms: exercise, deep breathing/meditation,” said another youth who participated in these classes. “Deep breathing methods to calm myself down when angry. I would recommend the class.”

Youth are provided a certificate of participation which they can provide to their assigned probation officer.

“These skills not only assist youth in navigating and succeeding in adolescence,” Lopez said. “Extensive research shows that it is a critical ability when it comes to interpersonal communication and is a hot topic in the business world.”

In addition, each youth is offered a free journal following completion with encouragement to be creative through reflective writing, drawing and self-exploration. Self-exploration is important because it helps youth develop self-awareness and self-regulation - two key elements of emotional awareness.

“The struggle for self-discovery is the major task of adolescent development. Identity formation in teens is about developing a strong sense of self, personality, connection to others and individuality,” said Juvenile Probation Officer Elizabeth Frey. “Self-exploration in adolescence supports their psychological development, encourages a strong sense of self and creates a psychological foundation that will help them face adversity and supports taking responsibility for their own life.”

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