

# AMOS helps juvenile offenders keep a clean record

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The young teen was stopped before she walked out of the thrift store, wearing layers of stolen garments under her own clothing.

The girl, whose family recently had immigrated to the United States, was asked to return the items she was trying to steal from The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. When she refused, Des Moines police were called.

Days later thrift store managers were asked if they would take part in a mediation with the girl and her family that, if successful, would keep her out of the juvenile court system. The managers agreed.

“From a juvenile justice perspective, I think that it’s imperative the youth are developed and not just punished,” said Steve Havemann, executive director of the center at 1426 Sixth Ave.



More than a year ago, the nonprofit community organization AMOS (A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy) began working with Des Moines police on a mediation program that helps first-time,

low- to mid-level juvenile offenders understand the impact of their actions directly from their victims.

The meetings, called victim-offender conferences, are face to face and mediated by AMOS volunteers who have received special training.

After the meetings, which can last an hour or more, offenders may do some type of community service. If they stay out of trouble for six months, any record of their criminal act is deleted from the police computer system; their names are never entered into the state juvenile court record system.

AMOS has been involved in more than 30 mediations. Recidivism has been practically nil, prompting plans to expand the program with a focus on first-time juvenile offenders who have shoplifted or vandalized property.

“Our goal is to keep children out of the system as much as possible so that they don’t have a record,” said the Rev. Dr. Brigitte A. Black, an AMOS member and pastor of Bethel AME Church on Des Moines’ east side. “We know that once they get a record, it follows them the rest of their life, and it can be detrimental to college or to whatever they do in their future.”

## **The power of restorative justice**

In a five-year period, the number of complaints filed against Iowa juveniles has dropped 35 percent, from 24,991 in 2009 to 16,389 in 2014, state data shows.

Part of the reason for the drop can be attributed to restorative justice programs similar to what AMOS offers, say those in law enforcement.

Restorative justice, which emphasizes repairing harm caused by criminal acts, has been popular for the past 35 years. However, it’s only been in the past five to 10 years that it has gained traction as an effective way to handle juvenile crime and student discipline.

The Des Moines Police Department, for example, began its Second Chance Diversion program in 2008.

Two to three times a year, a group of 15 to 20 first-time young offenders take part in the program that offers mentoring with a police officer and requires offenders to write a letter of apology and complete up to 40 hours of community service. If offenders successfully complete a six-month probation, their records are wiped clean.

“We tell them that this is their one and only second chance with the police department,” Des Moines police Lt. Larry Davey said. “We tell them if you get busted again for a crime — you’ve had your second chance.”

The program’s success rate is about 60 percent, Davey said.



For several years AMOS has overseen a successful mediation program with the Des Moines school district, and police asked if something similar could be done in the community with juvenile offenders.

“It’s one thing to do a crime and go through the acts of community service and (other) requirements that we have, but when they have to sit across from a victim ... it makes them more accountable for the crime that was committed,” Davey said. “It validates the importance of making good choices.”

The mediation program's success rate exceeds 90 percent, Davey said.

“It’s working,” Des Moines police Chief Dana Wingert said. “If we can keep them out of the juvenile court system and they can, in turn, keep themselves on the straight and narrow, that’s a huge win.”

## **The weight of their actions**

Two sisters were recently caught shoplifting about \$50 worth of items from a major retail chain. Neither had a previous criminal record and were recommended by a police officer to take part in the mediation program.

During the victim-offender conference one of the sisters commented that she didn't think the theft "was a big deal because (the company) was huge and her \$50 theft wouldn't matter to them," said Dennis Coon, an AMOS member and retired United Methodist minister.

"The loss prevention officer told the girls that those thefts mount up. He said the (chain) recently closed a store in Ottumwa because of loss, part of which was due to theft," Coon said. "One of the girls said 'could my theft have caused families to lose their jobs?' She saw how her actions impacted the community.

"There was transformation in that room."

AMOS members said their program is successful because it forces the offender and victim to talk — and listen — to one another.

"One of the big things about the mediation is that people have to listen to each other," said Cheryl Hayes, an AMOS member. "It's not just my story — I have to listen to yours, too. That's part of our problem is that we don't listen to each other."

AMOS plans to expand its community mediation program and over the coming months will provide more information to Des Moines police officers so that they can begin making more referrals particularly in the areas of shoplifting and vandalism, said Liz Hall, an AMOS official. "We think that this program is a good fit for those kinds of cases."

AMOS will attend police in-service training later in the year, she said.



Tammie Wellons, a supervisor at St. Vincent DePaul, said she's glad the program is expanding.

The teen caught shoplifting completed 20 hours of community service at the thrift store, Wellons said.

"She learned what it was like to earn something," Wellons said. "She's not a bad girl. She just made a bad choice."

The teen also obtained some skills that will help her if she decides to work in retail, Havemann said. And if she needs a job reference, St. Vincent DePaul will provide one, he said.

**Link to article:** <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/crime-and-courts/2016/05/13/amos-mediation-des-moines-police/84342352/>