

Jamar Saunders

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House Committee on Juvenile Delinquency & Alternatives to Placement

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, thank you for having me testify and share my story today. My name is Jamar Saunders and I am a founding member of the Chester High School Youth Court and a current member of its executive board.

I had always been a hard working, straight A student until 9<sup>th</sup> grade when I entered high school. High school was very challenging for me because it was hard to adapt to the new social situation I found myself in. My grades fell because of a lack of interest in school and in life. I did not go to class because I was not interested in the subjects that I had to learn about and that made me bored. I started hanging out with a bad crowd, skipping classes became a bad habit, and quickly my grades fell tremendously in all my classes. The bad crowd was the only group of people who would accept me for who I was. The crowd I was hanging out with was involved in gang related activity and school was no longer a priority.

Then one day my friends' parole officer told him to check out a program, which turned out to be youth court. We were told we would get a free computer if we participated in youth court so I started to participate. After a while participating in youth court, I forgot about the computer because I enjoyed youth court so much. My friends left the youth court but I decided to stay. At first youth court was difficult because of the different things we had to learn such as how to question a respondent and we also had to deal with a lack of student participation. I stayed in youth court because of the lessons youth court taught me. Youth court taught me the importance of education, helped me develop good social skills, helped me develop better leadership skills, and helped me develop my interest in law. Youth court became something that I could own because I had put so much of my time and effort into making it work.

Most importantly, I found positive friendship in youth court, I learned how the environment at Chester High School affected how students felt about their community and their education, and youth court also gave me a role to play in my community as a leader.

Without youth court I would probably be roaming the street, still in the ninth grade, hanging out with the same bad crowd, and not thinking about my future. Now I want to go to college to focus on science, maybe forensic science. By the end of my freshman year I had a 1.4 GPA and now at the end of my junior year I have a 3.9 GPA. I plan on continuing my work with youth court my senior year. I want youth court to grow and help more students realize that education is important and get more students interested in law, and change the negative outlook so many students have on the law.