



NEWS

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MTA MARS PROGRAM KEEPS JUVENILES OUT OF JAIL AND TEACHES ACCOUNTABILITY

The MTA has joined the fight against graffiti vandalism with a creative program which offers short and long-term solutions to the every day problem affecting its buses, trains, bus stops, rail right-of-ways and terminals.

The MARS program (Mediation and Restitution Services) gives the Los Angeles County courts the opportunity to offer juveniles arrested for vandalizing MTA property, or committing burglary and minor felonies and misdemeanors the choice of doing community service as an alternative to paying fines or going to jail.

Youths are assigned anywhere between 100 to 1,000 work hours depending on the gravity of their offense and put to work on weekends until they complete their number of hours . They remove graffiti, clean buses and bus stops as well as do weeding and trash abatement on other MTA properties.

"We believe the MARS program offers a win-win for everyone ," said Pete Serdienis, MTA Stops and Zones manager. "On the first day, juveniles must be accompanied by a parent or legal guardian to an initial orientation session. The parent must sign a consent form agreeing to the rules of the program on behalf of the son or daughter. We present the individual, who is usually a male between 13 and 17 years old, the social and financial consequences of his destructive behavior. We attempt to reach suitable

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restitution in the form of community service or payment of monetary damages. The result is that juveniles stay out of jail but learn personal accountability and the MTA recovers the costs associated with maintaining its properties in good condition."

During the execution of community service, besides the strict oversight of the tasks, crew supervisors encourage the juveniles to develop an ongoing sense of personal responsibility, to stay in school and to set constructive goals.

The MARS goal is to reduce recidivism among juvenile offenders and consequent caseloads for prosecutors and courts. The program enjoys strong community support especially in communities where the youths live and at the schools they attend.

The program also extends to adults who are arrested for similar misdemeanors or such violations as unpaid parking tickets or drunk driving.

"Many ordinary, normal people get caught driving under the influence," continued Serdienenis. "For these people community service work is a very appropriate way to serve their sentences."

Adults work both weekdays and weekends and primarily clean bus stops, bus shelters, benches and surrounding areas. In a recent month, adult and juvenile crews cleaned 1600 bus stops, 200 buses and approximately one acre of MTA inactive rail right-of-ways and properties. On Saturdays and Sundays the program can accommodate up to 25 juveniles and up to 70 adults.

The MTA Board of Directors introduced the use of community service in 1993. It began with an aggressive anti-graffiti program which later expanded to include Probation Department juvenile work crews.

By 1995, the program came to be known as the Zero Tolerance Program. As the MTA Board increased funding and the Probation Department expanded

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its juvenile program, the MARS program came into existence. In 1996, individual MTA Board members galvanized support among judges to send court referrals to MTA for community service. Transit police officers were used to supervise juvenile work crews but this responsibility fell to civilian supervisors when MTA Transit Police merged with the LAPD and Sheriff's Department in 1998.

"We're extremely gratified at the success of the MARS program," said Serdienen. "It has provided the opportunity for the MTA to demonstrate its commitment to the communities we serve. These services not only have had a positive effect on the participants but also have made our inactive right-of-ways cleaner and safer, enhanced the appearance of our bus fleet and provided cleaner bus stops for our customers."

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