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Clerk of the Circuit Court & Comptroller
Pinellas County, FL



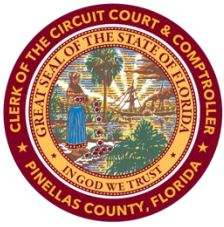
INVESTIGATION OF SIXTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT TRUANCY TEEN COURT EMPLOYEE MISUSE OF TIME



Melissa Dondero, CPA, CIA, CIG, CIGA, CIGI, CITP, CRMA, CFS, CECFE
Inspector General/Chief Audit Executive

Investigation Team
Darcy Eckert, CIGA, CIGI, CCA, CECFE, CFS, CGI - Assistant Inspector General
Jason Pummer, CIGA, CIGI, CECFE - Inspector General II
Lori Scott, CIGI - Inspector General I

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KEN BURKE, CPA

Clerk of the Circuit Court & Comptroller
Pinellas County, FL

Division of Inspector General

510 Bay Avenue
Clearwater, FL 33756
Telephone: (727) 464-8371
Fax: (727) 464-8386
Fraud Hotline: (727) 45FRAUD (453-7283)
Clerk's website: www.mypinellasclerk.gov



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April 4, 2025

Jennifer A. Parker, Trial Courts Administrator, Sixth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida

The Division of Inspector General's Public Integrity Unit has completed an investigation of the following allegations:

- The Respondent misused work time.
- The Respondent falsified employment records.

Based on documented evidence, facts, and other evidentiary information, such as testimony, we concluded that the allegations were **unsubstantiated**; there was insufficient evidence to either prove or disprove the allegations.

The recommendations presented in this report may not be all-inclusive of areas where improvement may be needed; however, we believe implementation of the recommendations will strengthen the current internal controls.

We appreciate the cooperation shown by the staff of the Sixth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida during the course of this investigation.

Respectfully Submitted,

Melissa Dondero
Inspector General/Chief Audit Executive

cc: Gina Jeffrey, Unified Family Court Director, Sixth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida
Thomas Toy, Teen Court Coordinator, Sixth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida
Lyndsey E. Siara, General Counsel, Office of Court Counsel, Sixth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida
Ken Burke, CPA, Clerk of the Circuit Court and Comptroller

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ABBREVIATIONS

County	Pinellas County
Court	Sixth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida
CY	Calendar Year
FY	Fiscal Year
IG	Division of Inspector General
JDS	Juvenile Diversion Services
PCSB	Pinellas County School Board
Respondent	Former Court Program Specialist II
TTC	Truancy Teen Court
UFC	Unified Family Court

INTRODUCTION

Predicate

The Division of Inspector General (IG) received a complaint that a former Court Program Specialist II (Respondent), Teen Court, Juvenile Services Division, Unified Family Court (UFC), Sixth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida (Court), had not been performing their work as required, and as a result, had falsified time records and other employment documents.

Allegations

The IG's Public Integrity Unit investigated the following allegations:

- The Respondent misused work time.
- The Respondent falsified employment records.

To determine whether the allegations were substantiated, we reviewed policies, procedures, and appropriate records. We also interviewed staff and other parties, as needed. Our investigation was conducted in compliance with the Quality Standards for Investigations found within the *Principles and Standards for Offices of Inspector General* as published by the Association of Inspectors General and *The Florida Inspectors General Standards Manual* from The Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation.

Background

Pinellas County (County) provides funding to the Court for various activities, including local court programs. The Court's UFC includes Juvenile Diversion Services (JDS), which administers juvenile diversion programs to provide second chances for at-risk youths. To be eligible, youths must not have previously been in the criminal justice system and must not be accused of violent crimes. Through intervention, prevention, and services to juvenile defendants, the programs strive to relieve overburdened juvenile courts by providing non-judicial dispositions of lesser juvenile offenses. JDS manages the following programs:

- Juvenile Arrest Avoidance Program
- Juvenile Arbitration
- Service & Treatment for Offender Prevention
- Teen Court
- Juvenile Drug Court
- At Risk Intervention and Motivation

Teen Court was developed as a way to stop criminal behavior in youths under 18 years of age. As part of the program, teens who admit guilt attend a hearing and a group of peers impose sanctions, including counseling, community service, essays, letters of apology, jail or funeral home tours, gang awareness programs, education about conflict resolution, dropout

prevention, theft prevention, substance abuse testing, and pre-teen awareness. During fiscal year (FY) 2023-2024, Teen Court processed 631 cases.

The Respondent was assigned work through the Truancy Teen Court (TTC) program, and therefore, the Respondent's position was County funded. TTC was designed for youths who have established a pattern of school non-attendance and unexcused absences (truants). Truants in the program follow the Teen Court process described above, may be required to attend educational programs and counseling, and must meet mandatory school attendance standards. During FY 2023-2024, TTC served 274 youths.

TTC targets students in middle school through 10th grade and ages 11 - 16. TTC is separated into three parts, as follows:

- TTC 1: Students who have unexcused absences between 5-15 days.
- TTC 2: Students who have unexcused absences between 15-30 days (prior successful completion of TTC 1).
- TTC 3: The UFC Judge offers to participants who qualify and that were never provided the opportunity to participate in TTC 1 or TTC 2.

The Respondent was responsible for coordinating the TTC 1 and TTC 2 programs (during the Respondent's employment, TTC 3 was not yet implemented). The Respondent and another staff member shared the case load (the Respondent was assigned students at south County schools, and another staff member was assigned students at north County schools). Processing truancy cases through Teen Court included receiving case referrals from schools, informing parents and students about the program, attending hearings, and regularly visiting students at their schools. The Respondent was expected to visit students at least monthly, but visits typically occurred biweekly, which management indicated was acceptable.

The following process was followed for TTC 1 and TTC 2:

- The Child Study Team at each school (made up of the school social worker, guidance counselors, and administrators) initiated a referral to TTC. The social worker contacted the family of the student and sent a referral to TTC.
- TTC processed the referral within seven days and notified the social worker.
- TTC scheduled a hearing for the parent and student; during the hearing, sanctions were assigned.
- TTC notified the social worker of the sanctions within three days of the initial hearing.

During the TTC program, the student completed the assigned sanctions, TTC staff visited the students at their schools, and follow-up hearings were scheduled every four weeks to obtain the student's attendance status. The goal was for the student to attend school for 30 days. After successful program completion, TTC sent a final report to the school social worker. If the program was not successfully completed, TTC's final report recommended a

truancy petition; the final report was provided to the school social worker. The Pinellas County School Board (PCSB) attorney decided whether to file a truancy petition or not. If the PCSB attorney filed a petition, a case would be initiated through UFC.

INVESTIGATION ACTIVITY AND CONCLUSION

The Division of Inspector General uses the following terminology for the conclusion of fact/findings:

- **Substantiated** – An allegation is substantiated when there is sufficient evidence to conclude the allegation is true.
- **Unsubstantiated** – An allegation is unsubstantiated when there is insufficient evidence to either prove or disprove the allegation.
- **Unfounded** – An allegation is unfounded when it is proved to be false or there is no credible evidence to support it.
- **Justified** – An allegation is justified when it is proved to be true. However, the actions were appropriate in the circumstances.

Allegation #1. The Respondent misused work time.

Allegation #2. The Respondent falsified employment records.

The Complainant reported to the IG that the Respondent had not been visiting schools as required by their job assignment. When the Respondent took a leave of absence, another staff visited the schools assigned to the Respondent to perform the student visits. When the staff arrived at the schools, the school administrators were not familiar with the Respondent. The staff encountered one social worker at a school who knew who the Respondent was, but asked why they had not been visiting the schools for months. The staff interviewed the assigned students at the schools who were also unfamiliar with the Respondent. As a result, the Respondent's supervisor visited the schools assigned to the Respondent, and also found that most schools were not familiar with the Respondent.

TTC procedures at the time required that TTC staff sign in at the schools. The Respondent's supervisor noted at that time, the schools had inconsistent sign-in procedures. Some used paper logs to sign-in visitors and some used a computer system. In addition, some schools did not enforce sign-in procedures with Court staff. Therefore, sign-in documentation was not reliable.

TTC management indicated that on school visit days, the Respondent reported directly from their home to the schools and then returned home. Management was not able to verify work performed by the Respondent due to the lack of consistent sign-in procedures at schools and a lack of documentation of the visits in the case files. TTC procedures at the time required staff to keep case notes, including school visits, in a paper case file. However, management reported that the Respondent did not keep sufficient notes of their school visits and the Respondent's supervisor did not review the notes or ensure the Respondent kept sufficient notes.

When TTC management visited one of the Respondent's assigned schools to inquire further, management found that the secretary at the school was unfamiliar with the Respondent nor the TTC program. When management met with the school's referring staff member, the staff member indicated they had not met or seen the Respondent for the entire school year to date (approximately four months). The staff member also noted they made several referrals for the TTC program and had not received any updates.

TTC management also noted the following when visiting that school to meet with the Respondent's active students:

- For two students, the Respondent had noted the students were present during the Respondent's last school visit. However, management confirmed with school staff and in the school's online portal that the students had withdrawn from that school prior to the Respondent's last recorded visit.

We were able to verify the following by reviewing documentation in the PCSB's portal and emails from TTC management:

Student	Last Date at School	Staff Meeting Date
Student 1	11/3/2022	11/29/2022
Student 2	10/24/2022	11/29/2022

TTC management indicated that during a staff meeting on November 29, 2022, the Respondent verbally communicated that Students 1 and 2 were in attendance at school visits during November. TTC management provided the Respondent's active list of students at the time of the staff meeting and noted the Respondent had indicated "present" for both students in their notes. We reviewed the travel reimbursements the Respondent submitted and they indicated they visited the school on November 10, 2022, and on November 17, 2022; however, the Respondent could have been visiting other active students at that school and the notation of "present" could have been from a prior visit.

- One student stated they had never met nor seen the Respondent since they started the TTC program approximately two months prior.

The Respondent resigned from their position with the Court before management could discuss the situation with them.

We reviewed the Respondent's travel reimbursements and time records for calendar year (CY) 2021 and CY 2022. During Covid-19, there were no in-person school visits, which lasted through September 2021. Beginning in October 2021, the Respondent visited each school 2-4 times per month. The Respondent submitted mileage reimbursement requests and was paid the following amounts for travel for school visits in CY 2021 and CY 2022:

CY	Month	Amount Reimbursed
2021	October	\$76.48
2021	November	\$76.48
2021	December	\$76.48
2022	January	\$79.94
2022	February	\$79.94
2022	March	\$79.94
2022	April	\$79.94
2022	May	\$119.91
2022	June	\$0.00
2022	July	\$0.00
2022	August	\$292.59
2022	September	\$292.59
2022	October	\$319.97
2022	November	\$292.59
2022	December	\$0.00
Total		\$1,866.85

The Respondent's mileage reimbursement records for CY 2021 and CY 2022 included 19 schools. We visited 9 of them in order to determine if anyone at the school was familiar with the Respondent. We noted the following from our school visits:

- At two of the schools, staff that greeted visitors during the periods we reviewed no longer worked at the school. Therefore, we could not obtain any information from the schools about the Respondent.
- At five schools, we were able to interview one or more staff that actively processed visitors during the periods we reviewed. We showed the interviewees a photograph of the Respondent and nobody recognized the Respondent. Two of the five recalled interacting with TTC staff, but not with the Respondent.
- At one school, we were able to interview six staff that actively processed visitors during the periods we reviewed. We showed the interviewees a photograph of the Respondent and four of the six did not recognize the Respondent. Two of the six could not be sure if they recognized the Respondent, but one said they thought they did.
- At one school, we were able to interview one staff member that interacted with the Respondent via email to refer cases and obtain status updates; however, they never met the Respondent and did not recognize the Respondent in the photograph.

We attempted to locate and interview all students that were assigned to five of the nine schools we visited. We attempted to contact a parent for all 29 students that attended the five schools and noted the following:

- We were unable to speak to 19 parents.
- Five parents were unwilling to interview or have their children interviewed.
- Three parents could not remember if their children were visited by the Respondent.
- Two parents stated their children were not visited by the Respondent.

We requested the paper case files for the 29 students we attempted to interview. Management was able to provide 16 of the 29 files, and indicated the others could not be located. Management speculated that the Respondent or the Respondent's prior supervisor, who no longer works for the Court, could have retained the files. During our review of the 16 available files, we noted the Respondent did not document any school visits, contrary to the procedure at the time.

We attempted to interview the Respondent; however, they were unwilling to participate in an interview.

Although there is a strong indication that the Respondent was not always visiting the schools they were assigned to, due to staff turnover at the schools and a lack of available documentation, we could not obtain sufficient evidence to prove the Respondent misused work time or falsified employment records.

We determined both allegations 1 and 2 were **unsubstantiated**.

INVESTIGATION FINDINGS

1. The Respondent Was Paid For Travel On Nonworking Days.

We reviewed the Respondent's payroll records from the beginning of employment (2019) to the end of employment (2023) and compared it to the Respondent's travel reimbursement records. We noted two days when the Respondent was paid for nonworking time and also received mileage reimbursement for work travel, as follows:

Date	Nonworking Time	Mileage Reimbursement Received
3/28/2022	Annual Leave - 8 Hours	\$20.13
3/29/2022	Personal Day - 8 Hours	\$18.61
Total		\$38.74

We confirmed the Respondent was paid for both the travel and the nonworking time. However, we could not confirm if the Respondent actually worked on the days when nonworking time was paid. Management indicated sometimes leave requests are submitted and then the employee ends up working. The employee may have prepopulated their timecard with nonworking time and forgotten to amend it for the time worked.

The Court did not have a process in place to reconcile mileage reimbursement submissions with timecards. The Respondent's supervisor at the time, who is no longer employed with the Court, was responsible for ensuring the timecards and mileage reimbursements were appropriate and accurate. The supervisor did not have a process in place to reconcile the records.

Since the Respondent's position was classified excluded, the Fair Labor Standards Act requirements related to overtime do not apply. However, Personnel Rule 3. Compensation, states the following:

"Salaried Classified Service employees, those certified by the Appointing Authority through the County Attorney to the Chief Human Resources Officer as excluded from the overtime provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act ("Classified Excluded"), will be compensated at time and one half for any hours worked over 80 in a pay period if approved by the Appointing Authority."

The County's Personnel Rule 6. Discipline states the following:

*"Category H. Intentional Falsification of Records, Infraction:
Falsification of work-related documents and records or employment application*

Category I. Theft, Infraction:

Time paid - The employee has intentionally falsified a time record or made a false claim for leave.

*Category K. The Employee Has Engaged in Conduct Unbecoming of an Employee of the County, Infraction:
Violation of Pinellas County Statement of Ethics"*

Engaging in conduct unbecoming of a County employee or other behavior that affects the public trust is a poor representation of a County employee. Inaccurate records pose a risk to the County since the County would not be able to definitively account for where the employee was on the days noted. Additionally, the County cannot accurately track overtime and associated policy requirements if actual working hours are not known. During our review, management implemented a policy that requires supervisors to reconcile time records with mileage reimbursement requests.

We Recommend Management:

Ensure managers are trained and comply with the updated policy to review employees' time records and mileage reimbursements for appropriateness and accuracy.

Management Response:

Management Concurs.

- ✓ **Individual(s) Responsible for Implementation:** Gina Jeffrey, UFC Director, Unified Family Court, Sixth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida
- ✓ **Planned Implementation Completion Date:** Implemented March 1, 2025

2. There Was Insufficient Oversight of Truancy Teen Court Staff.

Management reported to the IG that they believed the Respondent was not doing assigned work at schools, even though they submitted travel reimbursement requests for going to the schools. Management became aware when the Respondent missed work, and other staff visited the schools to cover for the Respondent. Staff noted that school personnel were unfamiliar with the Respondent. At the time, the Respondent was supposed to document school visits in the student's hard copy case file. However, the Respondent's notes were insufficient and some of the case files were missing. Therefore, there was no way to review case data to verify which students were visited.

After management became aware of the Respondent's alleged actions and during the investigation, management increased oversight by implementing the following policy changes/additions:

- TTC staff must sign in at each school using both the hard copy sign-in book and the electronic scan.
- TTC staff must document notes in Odyssey, the Court's case management system, on each school visit.
- TTC management reviews Odyssey periodically for notes on active students.
- TTC management will accompany each staff on a school visit once per semester.

In order to effectively manage staff, management must be able to verify work has been completed. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, including frequent discussions with staff about their work, reviewing documentation or output of the work performed, and by periodically reviewing the work.

Management indicated policies and procedures were problematic and insufficient processes were in place. As a result of the lack of oversight, the Respondent was missing at least some of the required school visits, and still earning their salary and receiving travel reimbursements for the time. We could not quantify the loss to the County due to the uncertainty of the information and lack of record-keeping. However, Investigation Finding 1 above illustrates that the Respondent was paid for leave time and for travel reimbursement on the same days.

We Recommend Management:

Ensure staff are trained on and follow the new policies.

Management Response:

Management Concur.

- ✓ **Individual(s) Responsible for Implementation:** Thomas Toy, Teen Court Coordinator, and Alicia McLane, Juvenile Diversion Program Coordinator, Sixth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida
- ✓ **Planned Implementation Completion Date:** Implemented March 18, 2025



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510 Bay Avenue
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