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La Cour supérieure de justice
The Honourable Brian W. Lennox
L'honorable Brian W. Lennox
former Chief Justice of the
Ontario Court of Justice
Ancien juge en chef de
La Cour de justice de l'Ontario

Dear OJEN Volunteer,

Thank you for giving your time to support public legal education for young people in Ontario. When you became an OJEN volunteer, you joined a community of over 1600 professionals who help run our justice education programs across the province. You are the reason that our small not-for-profit organization is able to impact over 200,000 youth in Ontario every year.

OJEN's approach to justice education is not just about sharing information about the law; it is also about building young people's legal capability. We create opportunities for young people in Ontario to learn about the law, build skills to manage legal problems, and meet people who work in the legal system. We want young people to feel comfortable and confident when dealing with the legal issues they face now, and in the future. Since our formation in 2002, OJEN has brought the legal, educational and community sectors together to collapse some of the barriers to access to justice in Ontario. The community partners you will be working with play a key role in the lives of young people living in vulnerable environments. We acknowledge and appreciate all that they do to meet the needs of young people.

This volunteer orientation package will help you prepare for your time in the community. It includes facilitation tips, OJEN's volunteer code of conduct, and links to additional resources that are available through our website and some of our trusted partners.

We hope you enjoy your time volunteering with OJEN. If there is any way we can better support you, please reach out to your OJEN staff contact, or email us at info@ojen.ca. Please keep in touch – we love to hear your feedback!

To stay up to date with OJEN news and volunteer opportunities, sign up for our newsletter at ojen.ca/en/subscribe.

Sincerely,

Jess Reekie
Executive Director, Ontario Justice Education Network (OJEN)

Volunteer Code of Conduct

This Code of Conduct (Code) applies to all individuals who volunteer with the Ontario Justice Education Network (OJEN) in any capacity.

OJEN is a charitable, not-for-profit, public legal education organization. We develop innovative educational tools and programs that share legal information and build the skills and connections young people need to manage the legal issues they face now, and in the future. We advance access to justice in Ontario by helping young people develop their legal capability and by fostering connections between the justice sector and the wider community.

With the support of 1600+ active volunteers, OJEN reaches thousands of young people each year through our public legal education programs and resources. While volunteers offer youth the benefit of their legal knowledge and expertise, they benefit equally from the insights they gain into the lived experiences of young people and the communities they serve. Recognition of the reciprocal nature of the learning experience is central to our public legal education philosophy.

OJEN's programs are youth-focused, practical, and honest. We connect with young people where they are, and on their terms. We respect their autonomy and their capacity to impact the world. We believe young people deserve to understand the law and the ways it affects their lives. We share information about the legal system as it is in practice, without minimizing or misrepresenting its challenges, problems, and issues.

The foundation of this Code is our commitment to providing a safe and respectful environment for young people, volunteers, program partners and staff.

General

1. As a volunteer with OJEN, you represent us in the eyes of the community. We count on you to conduct yourself in a manner that is professional and ethical.
2. OJEN programs are designed to provide legal information. Volunteers must not offer legal advice to anyone participating in an OJEN activity.
3. OJEN volunteers are expected to come prepared to their program. This includes reviewing any program agendas, facilitation notes, and training resources shared in advance.
4. We ask that volunteers be timely in their communications with staff and program partners.
5. We ask all OJEN volunteers to be open to giving and receiving honest and constructive feedback. This allows us to assess what aspects of our programs work well and what can be improved.

6. At the earliest opportunity, volunteers must declare any conflict between their personal interests and that of OJEN.
7. Intellectual property developed by a volunteer through their role with OJEN, (e.g., program agendas, facilitation notes, teaching resources, etc.) is the property of OJEN, although credit may be recognized, as appropriate. This does not include presentation materials developed solely by a volunteer for a Law Institute or an OJEN webinar where OJEN staff have not co-created these materials with the volunteer.

Cultural safety and inclusion

8. We want young people to feel respected and safe when they participate in an OJEN program. We ask that all volunteers work towards developing strong cultural safety and inclusive practices. This involves paying attention to how social and historical contexts shape the legal system and young people's experiences with it. It also means engaging in critical self-reflection and being honest about your own power and privilege.
9. Harassment, discrimination or the use of oppressive language or behaviour will not be tolerated.

Confidentiality and privacy

10. Volunteers must not use for their own purposes (including personal gain) any information obtained through their volunteer activities with OJEN, nor may they disclose this information to others.
11. Volunteers must not take or distribute their own photographs at an OJEN program when these photos include people other than themselves, including on social media. Not all youth participants sign OJEN's media release form, and we must be careful about photographing and distributing images of young people without their (or a parent/guardian's) consent.
12. Any requests for information about OJEN or access to our programs (from the media or external organizations) must be directed to an OJEN staff member.
13. Volunteers must maintain and respect the confidentiality of youth participants, program partners, other volunteers and OJEN staff. In all cases, assume that what a young person shares with you is confidential.

Exception: If you suspect a child is being abused or neglected, you **must** contact the Children's Aid Society (CAS). You must do this if the child is or seems to be under 16. If the child is 16 or 17, you can choose to report your concerns to CAS, but you do not have to. To learn more about the duty to report, please visit the [Steps to Justice website](#).

- 14.** Volunteers must not have contact with youth participants from an OJEN program, outside of the OJEN program. Please do not meet one-on-one with these youth. Our programs take place in classrooms and community centres where we expect teachers and youth workers to be present when the program takes place.

Handling conflict

- 15.** If a disagreement or verbal conflict occurs in the delivery of a program, volunteers are expected to listen to other people's perspectives before calmly and respectfully responding. We invite debate and discussion and want to ensure that people feel comfortable voicing their opinions.
- 16.** If you witness harmful behaviours or conflict between youth, or between a youth and staff, or you and a young person, please do not try to advise or discipline. Instead, alert the teacher, community partner, or an OJEN staff member.
- 17.** If you have a problem with anyone you encounter through your volunteer activities with OJEN, or if you notice another volunteer, teacher, community partner or staff member acting in a way that contravenes this Code, please alert an OJEN staff member.

This Code outlines minimum standards and does not cover every contingency. All OJEN volunteers are expected to comply with this Code. Failure to do so may result in the termination of the volunteer's involvement with OJEN, or other remedies as necessary to protect OJEN, our partners, other volunteers and our youth audience.

Engaging youth living in vulnerable environments

Perhaps you have heard the terms “at-risk”, “high-risk”, “vulnerable”, “marginalized” or “criminalized” youth. These terms can conjure negative perceptions and existing stereotypes. At OJEN, we refer to this youth population as “young people living in vulnerable environments” to call attention to their personhood first, and acknowledge the environmental factors (systemic racism, poverty, patriarchy) that shape their decisions, choices and resources. Here are some key points to remember when working with young people:

- Be aware of (and perhaps suspend) your judgement and expectations.
- Consider yourself a guest in the community space. Follow the lead of the partners and young people.
- It may take a while for youth to open up (and some will not). That is ok!
- Create opportunities with young people to show you and tell you who they are.
- A young person may be fully engaged in the program, but it may look different from what you may be expecting (on phones, doodling).
- Prioritize relationships, be yourself, be honest, and make the learning as engaging as possible.
- Leave the rest up to the young people and honour their self-determination.
- Dress simply and avoid wearing any uniform.

Many young people who live in vulnerable environments are racialized. This can include youth who are Indigenous, African, Caribbean and Black (ACB), and newcomer youth. An overrepresented number of these young people face racism, poverty, violence, addictions, mental health issues, as well as a lack of resources in their community. They may be disengaged from the educational system, involved with the justice system or have friends or family members who have been negatively impacted by the justice system. While we often hear about the negative experiences of this population from the media, many of these youth are growing up with loving families, and most are not involved with the justice system themselves. Please be careful about making assumptions.

Be sensitive to trauma and potential triggers

Several factors can impact how youth engage with justice sector professionals in programs. Intergenerational and historic trauma caused and perpetuated by Canada’s colonial history is of particular importance when engaging with Indigenous youth. Systemic racism and oppression contribute to the negative relationships many Indigenous, African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) and newcomer youth have with the justice system. Some youth experience fear and anger towards authority and may experience trauma triggers through an OJEN program. This is why we ask you not to wear your uniform in our programs.

Do not ask young people to share traumatic events, experiences or histories. If a story is shared, thank the person for sharing, but do not try to “fix” the situation or problem-solve. Always offer a support person (youth worker, OJEN staff, community partner representative) during or following the OJEN program.

Be honest and practical

It is really important to acknowledge that sometimes the law might say one thing, but real-world situations are messy and complicated. Sometimes a person may have a good reason to not exercise a right. Police encounters, confronting an employer, family disputes – these can be charged situations, or involve power imbalances that influence the choices we make – and it is important to recognize that.

At OJEN, we emphasize role-playing in our public legal education programs because it is important to explain to young people their legal options, and then provide opportunities for them to anticipate and practice how they might handle a potential legal problem.

Please be realistic about parts of the legal system that can be frustrating. Do not pretend that everything always works perfectly, and be sensitive to youth’s access to resources, especially those that involve money, power, and risk.

Be prepared to listen and learn too

Young people come to our programs with their own voices, knowledge, and experiences that make them experts in their own lives and communities. They have a lot to contribute and share. Your role as an OJEN volunteer will involve listening and learning from the communities who can benefit from your legal knowledge and experience.

Consider cultural, socio-economic factors, race, gender identities, age, language, place of origin of the youth in the program. Also consider your own positionality and how that may differ from the youth’s experience. You do not need to be fully equipped to be able to respond to all of these factors. If you enter the space with a commitment to learn that is equal to your commitment to share – that is a great start.

To learn more:

- [This is where we live: Justice and community – A youth perspective](#) (OJEN, video 12:33)
- [Guidelines for better legal workshops](#) (OJEN)
- [Guidelines for better legal workshops webinar](#) (OJEN)

Youth engagement tips

We encourage OJEN volunteers to use a participative (non-authoritarian) approach when engaging young people. Think of yourself as a “facilitator,” instead of a “teacher.” Keep these tips in mind:

- Introduce yourself informally, and introduce yourself with your pronouns.
- Ask youth participants to also share their name and their pronouns. Or use names, instead of pronouns, to avoid misgendering. Use gender neutral language – for example, use “folks” instead of “guys” to refer to a group.
- Avoid a lecture or traditional classroom set-up. Chairs placed in a circle or sitting around a large table is preferable to standing at the front of the room.
- Mirror the participants and match the norms and tone of the space (e.g. don’t stand, if everyone else is sitting).
- Keep it real, and be yourself. Young people will know if you are being inauthentic. They need you to show up and be honest.
- Ask open-ended questions and seek input from the youth participants. Shift between providing explanations and inviting young people to offer their thoughts and opinions. Example: “Why do you think we ask juries to decide if someone is guilty or innocent, instead of a judge?”
- It is ok to let a question “hang” for a little while after you ask it. Avoid answering your own questions too quickly if you are first met with silence. Give youth the opportunity to share their answers with small groups, before sharing with a big group.
- Be open to having discussions, even if this means that you do not cover all the legal information you had in mind for the session.
- Invite participation, but don’t insist upon it. Don’t put young people “on the spot” but make sure everyone feels welcome to participate in a variety of ways.
- Anticipate how you will manage personal anecdotes, misinformation, or politically charged statements if they arise during your workshop.
- Come to the workshop aware of sensitive or contentious issues that may arise in the session, particularly those around racial disparity and experiences of discrimination and racism. Address them honestly and to the best of your ability.

If someone in the group is rude or disruptive, ask the community partner or OJEN staff member (if present) to address the issue and do any behaviour correction.

Consider different learning styles

Knowing more about different learning styles can help you prepare for an engaging and interactive classroom visit. As you get ready for your classroom visit, consider the different learning styles below and think about ways you might incorporate the various engagement tips in the session.

OJEN classroom visits aim to vary activities and approaches by incorporating at least 2-3 different learning styles. If your visit involves lots of group discussions, consider dividing the youth into smaller discussion groups, before reconvening as a large group. This approach gives young people who are shy or uncertain the chance to participate more fully.

Learning Style	Description	Engagement Tips
Visual spatial	Processes information best when it is seen Pictures over words Images of ideas	Use slides and videos to illustrate legal concepts Provide paper and pens/crayons Ask participants to draw an answer, then share
Social interpersonal	Learns best with others Likes communication and feedback Enjoys group discussions	Small and large group discussions Circle set-up for discussion
Kinesthetic (Physical)	Finds success with hands-on opportunities	Use activities that require movement, like: "Line up," "4 corners," or a "Build a mock courtroom"
Logical	Learns best through logical reasoning Likes steps and systems Thinks and plans before acting	Map out steps to a solution Provide ample time to reflect and organize thoughts, before sharing
Verbal linguistic	All about written and spoken words Writes notes and outlines Enjoys group discussions	Small and large group discussions Activities that require writing and then presenting

Managing legal issues

Use clear, everyday language

It is important to avoid acronyms and jargon (legal or otherwise), but use the correct legal terms. When you introduce a new legal term, explain what it means. Use clear and simple language. Community Legal Education Ontario's [Steps to Justice website](#) provides plain language definitions for many common legal terms in the [glossary](#).

Legal information vs. legal advice

When addressing hypotheticals, be careful that you aren't giving legal advice. Remember legal information is general and not specific to one situation. It doesn't interpret the law or try to make guesses about what might happen. Legal advice addresses a specific situation. The point of legal advice is to tell the person what to do or to predict possible outcomes.

You do not want to give legal advice to anyone who isn't your client – it can cause problems with confidentiality and lead to complaints against your licence. More importantly, someone could act on advice you gave them without full knowledge of their situation and it could cause them harm.

Just saying you can't give legal advice isn't enough. In practice, people without legal training can have a hard time understanding the distinction between information and advice. Sometimes they think it's "just a disclaimer" you have to say. It can be a hard line to navigate. Be careful about how you answer questions, especially "hypothetical" ones – sometimes they are not really hypothetical at all.

Learn more: [Legal information vs. legal advice: What is the difference?](#)
(Centre for Public Legal Education Alberta)

Addressing misconceptions

Be clear but gentle when correcting misconceptions about the law. You can explain that there is a lot of misinformation about the law and what someone can do to resolve a legal issue. It's easy to see and get that information from a story in the media, from TV, social media or from someone who may have been misinformed.

Questions and answers

If you do not know the answer to a question – that's ok! Explain that you will need to look it up or consult with a colleague, and get back to them at the next session (if applicable). You could also offer to follow up with the teacher and share the answer with them if you won't be returning to the classroom.

Making referrals

Be ready with the name of the [local legal clinic](#), relevant public services, advocacy groups, community or other relevant organizations.

You can direct youth to the [Law Society Referral Service](#) and [Justice for Children and Youth](#) which provides legal services for young people under 18 and homeless youth under 25 in Ontario.