



How the Model is Being Adapted Across the United States

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE

The Midtown Community Court was created in 1993 to respond more effectively to street prostitution, vandalism, shoplifting, drug possession, and other quality-of-life offenses that had tarnished—some thought permanently—midtown Manhattan’s reputation as a capital of tourism and entertainment. Researchers subsequently documented that the Midtown Community Court’s approach—combining punishment and help by linking defendants to community restitution projects and on-site social services—made a difference, helping to reduce crime and improve public trust in justice.

In the years since the Midtown Community Court opened, some three dozen community courts have opened in the United States, and many others are operating abroad. Designed to address local concerns, these courts handle a wide range of issues—everything from quality-of-life crimes, truant youth, and landlord-tenant conflicts, to drug addiction, chronic homelessness, and sex trafficking.

While the various community courts are organized differently—some focus on one neighborhood, for example, while others serve an entire city or county—they share a common approach. All seek to impose immediate, meaningful sanctions on offenders, truly engage the community, and help offenders address the kinds of problems that often underlie criminal behavior.

Community courts have posed a new set of questions about the role of the court in a community’s daily life: What can a court do to solve neighborhood problems? Is it possible to forge new and creative responses to low-level offending instead of relying on incarceration as a default setting? What roles can community residents, businesses, and service providers play in improving justice? And how can the answers to those questions be applied beyond the community court itself to the wider court system?

The Bureau of Justice Assistance supports the efforts of judges, prosecutors, public defenders, and other local leaders who are interested in exploring concepts of community justice. For example, the Bureau of Justice Assistance has collaborated with the Center for Court Innovation to establish a network of regional mentor community courts to provide technical assistance to reformers across the country.

This publication offers a short review of community courts in the United States. The goal is to help innovators learn about community courts and decide whether the model might help them achieve the goals we all seek: a fair and effective justice system that enhances safety, supports victims, and protects our rights.

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# WHAT IS A COMMUNITY COURT?

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade and a half, cities and towns across the United States and around the world have sought to test the proposition that courts can play a role in solving complex neighborhood problems and building stronger communities. Since the 1993 opening of New York City's Midtown Community Court, dozens of cities have created their own community courts. At their outset, each court must address the following set of questions:

- Can courts assume a problem-solving role in the life of a community, bringing people together and helping to craft solutions to problems that communities face?
- How can courts' sentencing strategies address the effect that chronic offending has on a community?
- Can local voices—residents, merchants, community groups—play a role in the administration of justice?
- How can courts best link offenders to the services they need to avoid re-offending?
- Is it possible to craft meaningful alternatives to incarceration—and ensure that there are swift consequences for non-compliance?

Community courts answer these questions in different ways. Although many community courts focus on one neighborhood, several jurisdictions have created courts that serve a wider territory, sometimes even an entire city or county. Some community courts were begun as court-led initiatives, while others were initially championed by local prosecutors, executive branch leadership, or community activists. Many community courts handle only criminal cases, focusing largely on quality-of-life offending, such as shoplifting, graffiti, illegal vending, and prostitution. Others tackle a broader range of criminal cases, such as auto theft, low-level felony drug possession, stalking, and assault, while still others address non-criminal matters, including juvenile delinquency, housing issues, environmental code violations, or offender reentry. Community courts even have the capacity to combine under one roof a number of specialized court dockets. In an experiment in Orange County, California, a community court includes an adult drug court, a mental health court, a court for those charged with driving under the influence of alcohol, a veterans' court, a domestic violence court, and a homeless court.

Given the differences in court structure and focus, responses to offending vary. Typically, however, all community courts take a problem-solving and community-focused approach. In criminal cases, community courts combine punishment and help, requiring offenders to pay back the community by participating in restorative community service projects while also participating in individualized social service sanctions, such as drug treatment or mental health counseling. In civil cases, such as housing disputes, community courts bring new resources to help create long-lasting solutions; the Harlem Community Justice Center in Manhattan, for example, houses a resource center to give both tenants and landlords the support they need to pay their rent on time or make repairs, thus avoiding more problems in the future.

These variations reflect a central aspect of community courts: however they are organized, they are designed to respond to the particular concerns of individual communities. Moreover, community courts are shaped by the unique political, economic, and social landscapes in each community.

The Center for Court Innovation, with support from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance, has provided technical assistance to many community courts and has helped to document the emergence of this field. This monograph provides a snapshot of existing community courts in the United States and explores emerging issues in their development.

## OVERVIEW

When it opened in 1993, the Midtown Community Court represented a bold departure from “business as usual” in the court system. By mid-2010, some three dozen replications had opened across the United States, from California to Connecticut, Texas to Minnesota. Even more projects based upon community court principles are currently operating outside the United States in places like Australia, Canada, England, Singapore, and South Africa.

While these projects have many differences, in general they all rely on a set of common principles and practices:

- **Enhanced Information:** Using better staff training (about complex issues like drug addiction and mental illness) combined with better information (about defendants, victims, and the community context of crime) to help improve the decision making of judges, attorneys, and other justice officials.
- **Community Engagement:** Engaging citizens to help the justice system identify, prioritize, and solve local problems.
- **Collaboration:** Bringing together justice players (such as judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, probation officers, and court managers) and potential stakeholders beyond the courthouse (such as social service providers, residents, victims groups, schools) to improve inter-agency communication, improve trust between citizens and government, and foster new responses to problems.

- **Individualized Justice:** Using evidence-based risk and needs assessment instruments to link offenders to individually tailored community-based services (e.g., job training, drug treatment, safety planning, mental health counseling) where appropriate.
- **Accountability:** Employing community restitution mandates and regular compliance monitoring—with clear consequences for non-compliance—to improve the accountability of offenders
- **Outcomes:** Collecting and analyzing data on an active and ongoing basis—measuring outcomes and process, costs, and benefits—to evaluate the effectiveness of operations and encourage continuous improvement.

The effectiveness of these principles and practices at the Midtown Community Court has been well-documented (see, e.g., Sviridoff, M., Rottman, D., Ostram B. and Curtis, R. 2000. *Dispensing Justice Locally: The Implementation and Effects of the Midtown Community Court*. The Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers). Planners in other jurisdictions have made significant departures from the Midtown model, reflecting both the distinct needs of their communities and the practical realities of local resources. The following sections examine common questions that planners have asked as they designed their community courts and how they resolved them.

### ***How Does Community Court Planning Get Started?***

Community courts are complex projects that involve rethinking court operations, identifying significant resources, and building partnerships inside and outside the justice system.

In the U.S., the impetus for kicking off the planning of a community court has varied from state to state. Judges or local court administrators have sparked the planning effort in some 15 of the U.S.'s 37 operating courts. (Unless otherwise indicated, the numbers cited below refer to courts in the United States only).

Planning for at least another 15 courts was first suggested by the local district attorney or city attorney. Notably, community prosecution programs existed in 12 of these jurisdictions; in many places, the interest of local prosecutors in community court was a response to questions raised by their constituents about whether the justice system could pay closer attention to quality-of-life problems. The local mayor's office or a countywide criminal justice commission was involved in initiating the community court effort in at least seven jurisdictions.

Many projects recognized early on that a dedicated planner—in some cases a full-time coordinator, in others a staff person who dedicated a majority of his or her attention to the project—would be needed to move the community court from conception to implementation. This approach reflects the complexities of identifying resources, building community participation, developing an appropriate menu of court mandates, and establishing partnerships. To ensure that the partnerships necessary for success were established early in the planning process, most jurisdictions convened formal planning committees. The committees typically included representatives from the courts, local prosecutors' offices, defense bar, police departments, social service agencies, and

communities. In the projects that did not create planning committees, lead planners worked informally with project stakeholders.

The scope of the community court project, the readiness of local players to support the concept, the extent of any necessary construction, and the planners' success in garnering funds and in-kind support all affected the length of the planning process. The average planning period is around two years, although some jurisdictions used less than a year to create a community court.

### ***Which Communities Should Be Served and Where Should the Court Be Located?***

The first community court was established to serve the central business district of America's most populous city. One question asked by planners of subsequent projects was whether the community court model is applicable to smaller cities and other types of neighborhoods.

The community court approach has been recognized as a meaningful response to quality-of-life problems by many different communities. Today, many of the U.S.'s 37 operating community courts serve inner-city residential neighborhoods facing serious problems, including high crime rates, property abandonment, and chronic conditions of disorder. Some courts are located in suburban areas. At least four community courts serve downtown areas and tackle the low-level crime and public disorder issues that can be barriers to civic revitalization. Finally, at least nine projects are testing the idea of a community court that serves an entire county or medium-size city.

Another decision planners have faced is selecting an appropriate facility in which to locate the community court. The decision involves balancing community court goals such as visibility and accessibility to the public with the need to find sufficient space for on-site partners. Expense and the logistical issues of case processing are also important considerations. Community courts have arrived at a variety of solutions. At least 18 courts operate out of separate neighborhood-based facilities, while at least 13 courts currently operate within centralized courthouses. Several projects have come up with creative approaches in an effort to get the best of both worlds. For example, in Washington, D.C., the East of the River Community Court is based in the central downtown courthouse but focuses on a single set of neighborhoods cut off from the rest of the city by the Anacostia River.

The types of cases community courts accept vary depending on the communities that they serve. Courts in residential neighborhoods are more likely to address housing, environmental issues, and youth crime, whereas those in downtown areas prioritize issues such as homelessness and disorderly conduct.

### ***How Should the Court Use Alternative Sanctions?***

A core feature of the community court model is linking offenders to social services. Of the 37 community courts now operating in the United States, at least 14 provide on-site services such as case management, drug treatment, counseling, or assistance with entitlements. At least five sites provide referrals to social services plus ongoing case management; and at least nine provide referrals only.

All of the U.S.'s community courts are experimenting with the broad use of alternatives to incarceration (and, in most instances, alternatives to fines). There is mounting evidence that mandating defendants to social services can help recidivism. Most community courts tailor the mix of community service and social service mandates to the circumstances of each case; some defendants might be required to perform only community service, others only social services, while still others a combination of both.

Some community courts have sought to standardize their sentencing practices. In Seattle, for example, all mandates include a requirement to meet with one or more designated social service providers as well as perform community service.

Most community courts seek to engage defendants immediately by requiring them to meet with a community service coordinator the day of sentencing. Many courts share a building with social service providers, giving defendants easy access to the help they need. The Red Hook Community Justice Center in Brooklyn, New York offers within steps of the courtroom a host of services, including job training, high school equivalency classes, and mental health counseling. In Red Hook and in other community courts, on-site services are available not only to defendants but anyone who walks in off the street. In this way, community courts are true community resources, strengthening neighborhoods by opening their doors to all comers.

It's worth noting that while the Red Hook Justice Center invited social service providers to share space in its newly renovated courthouse, the opposite was true in South Dallas, where the 20 year-old Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center made room for the community court. In both cases, however, the result is the same: the court and social services providers work hand-in-hand to increase access to key services that help strengthen communities and reduce offending.

While most community courts hear primarily adult criminal cases, some community courts are exploring ways to expand their mandates beyond these case types. These experiments range from a judge in one courtroom hearing criminal, civil, and family matters, to judges hearing matters such as housing and environmental code violations, to courts doing special reentry calendars once a week to assist the reintegration of offenders into the community. At least six jurisdictions are exploring ways to handle youthful offenders at community court.

### ***What Role Should the Community Play?***

All community courts must grapple with how and when to involve the community. More fundamentally, they must ask themselves: Who is the community? In general, community courts seek to cast a wide net, reaching out to residents, social service providers, neighborhood institutions (such as schools and faith communities), justice partners (such as police and prosecutors), and local merchants.

Planners use a variety of tools to establish community participation, including attending neighborhood meetings and conducting interviews with a broad range of stakeholders. Most community courts created some sort of community advisory group during the planning period and held community meetings to determine local priorities. Many also held focus groups to better understand community members' concerns and recommendations. In Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington, community members were involved in recommending



sanctioning options. In Brooklyn, New York, community members helped to choose the location of the court. In Liverpool, England and Melbourne, Australia, community members were represented on the panel that selected the community court's judge.

Since opening, each court has taken a different approach to involving the community. The most common approach is convening a permanent community advisory board, which at least 17 have done. Other courts have also developed specific mechanisms for soliciting community involvement in making community service assignments, such as a telephone hotline like the one created by the Hartford Community Court. Other practices involving the community include: regular attendance at community meetings; community impact panels that bring together low-level defendants and local residents for facilitated dialogue; using volunteers to conduct door-to-door surveys to determine public safety concerns and priorities of neighborhood residents; and producing a newsletter to give community members visible evidence that the court is accountable to the community.

Another central way community courts open their doors to the public is by recognizing that defendants are not the only ones in a community who could benefit from educational, job training, and counseling programs. A community court can be a resource for anybody who needs assistance, providing referrals for drug treatment to anyone who walks in off the street, or offering its space for Alcoholics Anonymous groups or English-as-a-second-language classes, for example.

Some community courts even give local stakeholders a role in overseeing community restitution. For example, AmeriCorps volunteers, who undergo specialized training, now do most of the supervision of the community service workers at the Seattle Community Court.

### ***Are Community Courts Creating System Change?***

Community courts encourage key changes in court procedures. By emphasizing the value of information, they've pushed the development of new strategies and resources. For example, defendants in most community courts are screened for problems before seeing the judge. Psycho-social assessment tools are used to determine defendants' individual needs and suitability for customized social service sanctions.

In addition, many community courts have developed management information systems to facilitate rapid and up-to-date information sharing among the judge, lawyers, court staff, and social service partners. In this way, community courts—like the Downtown Community Court in Austin, Texas, which has a goal of going paperless—raise the standard of accountability for court-ordered sanctions, link together numerous key partners, and ultimately enhance both informed decision-making and immediacy.

Immediacy is also encouraged by placing punishment and help—that is, both community restitution and social services—within easy reach. For many community courts, this means housing social services and community service coordination on-site, thus ensuring that defendants begin fulfilling their sentences promptly after leaving the courtroom. Immediacy is supported in most community courts by someone filling the role of a “resource coordinator,” serving as a liaison between the courtroom and service partners.

In the two cities where community courts have been open the longest, New York City and Portland, the lessons of better information, immediacy, and community involvement in the administration of justice have begun to spread to the rest of the system.

In Portland, the success of the first community court convinced justice system officials to serve every neighborhood in Portland through special calendars on designated days of the week. In New York City, the success of Midtown Community Court led to the development of two other neighborhood-based community courts, encouraged greater use of community service and social service sanctions throughout the court system (for example, the centralized court nearly doubled its use of alternative sanctions since the Midtown Court opened), introduced the role of “resource coordinator” to other courts, started the trend of problem-solving courts throughout the state, and led to the establishment of a not-for-profit organization to be an engine for ongoing court innovation. Significantly, it also led to the opening in 2005 of a project—Bronx Community Solutions—that applies core community court principles throughout a busy urban courthouse serving an entire county. More recently, the NYC Community Cleanup project was created to apply the lessons learned through community courts to community service mandates throughout New York City’s criminal courts.

By emphasizing the importance of immediacy, community courts have helped encourage jurisdictions to shorten the arrest-to-arraignment time and the lag between arraignment and engagement in community restitution and social services. For example, through the efforts of the Hartford (Connecticut) Community Court, that city has been able to reduce its citation-to-arraignment time from two weeks to just two business days.

Community courts have modeled the value of rapid and thorough assessment of defendants, encouraging entire court systems to use state-of-the-art tools to assess defendants’ needs (as is now done in the entire borough of the Bronx for tens of thousands of misdemeanor offenders a year.) And as leaders in the use of courtroom technology, community courts have inspired others to adopt new information systems to enhance communication and accountability. In New York State, for example, the technology applications originally developed for community courts have informed the design of a statewide case management system set to begin rollout shortly.

In many places, community courts are explicitly seen as laboratories where ideas can be tested, whether they be new links to social service providers, new community restitution protocols, or new ways of engaging the public. Much of this work has been underwritten by external resources—ranging from state legislative and city council appropriations, to federal grants, to contributions from private foundations and corporations. At least 10 community courts have secured some level of private funding to help support their work.

Some community courts have relied on non-profit organizations to coordinate planning and implementation of their projects; some have also relied on non-profits to help with operations, develop new technology, promote public awareness of their work, and raise funds. In Atlanta, the Restorative Justice Center helps the Atlanta Community Court to raise funding and public awareness.

## SELECTED COMMUNITY COURT PROFILES

The following profiles provide a sense of the diversity of the community court movement.

### ***Midtown Community Court***

Launched in 1993, the Midtown Community Court targets quality-of-life offenses such as prostitution, illegal vending, graffiti, shoplifting, fare beating, and vandalism in midtown Manhattan. Often in such cases judges are forced to choose between a few days of jail time and no sentence at all—results that fail to impress the victim, the community, or the defendant that these offenses are taken seriously. In contrast, the Midtown Community Court sentences misdemeanor offenders to pay back the neighborhood through visible community restitution projects while offering them help with problems (addiction, homelessness, lack of job skills) that underlie their criminal behavior.

Many social services are available on-site at the Midtown Court, providing the judge with a range of services to include in a mandate, such as drug counseling, health education classes for prostitutes and “johns,” and employment training. For defendants with a long criminal record and a history of substance abuse, the court offers a special alternative-to-incarceration program that sentences defendants to long-term drug treatment. Many defendants return to court voluntarily to take advantage of on-site services, including high school equivalency and parenting classes.

Community involvement is extensive at the Midtown Community Court. A community conditions panel, comprised of representatives of the criminal justice system, as well as the business and residential communities, meets every month to keep the court abreast of local problems and emerging hot spots.

To enhance accountability, the court uses an award-winning computer application to monitor individualized sanctions for each offender and respond swiftly to noncompliance.

One of the hallmarks of the court is a commitment to responding to emerging problems. For example, the court has launched various initiatives to address the problem of homelessness. Project Reconnect, a collaboration between the Midtown Court and the city’s Department of Homeless Services, helps individuals clear warrants that hinder their ability to secure permanent housing in exchange for completing a series of tailored social service sessions. Shop Talk is an on-site psycho-educational group designed to motivate homeless offenders to take the necessary steps to access more permanent housing options.

In 2009, 87 percent of defendants at Midtown completed community service mandates, compared to 50 percent of the defendants who were processed at the downtown criminal courts.

Supervised defendants from Midtown can complete around 18,000 hours of community service in a year, or roughly the equivalent of \$140,000 of labor, including painting over graffiti, stuffing envelopes for local non-profit organizations, and cleaning the streets of Times Square and surrounding neighborhoods.

For a detailed description of how the court operates, see *How It Works: A Summary of Case Flow and Interventions at the Midtown Community Court*, described in the “Further Reading” section of this publication.

### ***Hartford Community Court***

The Hartford Community Court has its roots in the federally-funded Comprehensive Communities Partnership program that sought to improve coordination among criminal justice agencies and Hartford communities. The program initially focused on community policing and anti-gang initiatives, but community participants wanted something to be done about low-level crime as well. Planning for the community court began in 1996 and included enacting state legislation to mandate alternative sentences for ordinance violations.

The Hartford Community Court serves the entire city. To ensure that the court is responsive to local concerns, the court works closely with problem-solving committees in the city's 17 neighborhoods. The court sends community service crews to every neighborhood and, when possible, assigns offenders to perform community service in the neighborhood in which they were arrested. In recent years, the court has expanded its jurisdiction to include cases from neighboring suburban communities. On average, approximately 15 percent of the court's annual caseload comes from suburban communities.

A member of the bail commissioner's office screens defendants for arraignment. This interview serves as a criminal background check and is the first line of inquiry for social services screening.

After speaking with the state's attorney in court, if the defendant accepts a plea agreement, the judge issues a sentence that includes community service and/or social service mandates. Upon completion of the mandate, the defendant's case is dismissed 30 days later without the defendant having to reappear in court. If the defendant refuses the plea offer, the case stays with the judge. The judge hears bench trials at the community court; cases that are eligible for jury trials are transferred to superior court.

Each defendant is required to meet with the court's social service team, which includes staff from the city's Department of Human Services, the state's Department of Social Services and Department of Mental Health and Addiction, and the Capitol Region Mental Health Center. The interview covers issues such as substance abuse treatment, education services, health care, and housing options. Defendants are then linked with necessary social services.

The Hartford Community Court regularly employs mediation in resolving criminal cases. Mediation is voluntary, requiring the willing participation of both the victim and the offender. If an agreement is reached between the parties and restitution is required, the judge will make the mediation agreement part of the court's order and continue the case until the restitution and other terms of the agreement are fulfilled.

### ***Red Hook Community Justice Center***

The Red Hook Community Justice Center was born out of tragedy. In 1992, a beloved elementary school principal, Patrick Daly, was shot in broad daylight by local drug dealers. In the aftermath of his slaying, local criminal justice officials sought to create an innovative local justice center to improve public safety.

Operating in the heart of a low-income Brooklyn neighborhood, the Red Hook Community Justice Center hears cases that ordinarily are heard in three different courts—civil, family, and criminal. This model did not emerge by accident. Community stakeholders interviewed during the planning process stressed that the

problems faced by local families do not conform to the jurisdictional boundaries of the justice system. By having a single judge handle matters traditionally heard by different decision makers at different locations, the justice center offers a coordinated response to the problems that bring local residents to court.

The Red Hook judge can use an array of sanctions and services, including community restitution projects, on-site job training, drug treatment, and health counseling—all of which are rigorously monitored to ensure accountability and to encourage individual responsibility. State-of-the-art technology helps the judge monitor compliance.

The courthouse—a refurbished Catholic school—is the hub of an array of programs that engage local residents in “doing justice.” These programs include mediation, community service projects that put local volunteers to work repairing conditions of disorder, and a youth court where teenagers resolve actual cases involving their peers. Through these initiatives, Red Hook seeks to engage the community in aggressive crime prevention. The Justice Center’s planners see this strategy working in two ways: by solving local problems before they become a court problem and by helping knit together the fabric of the neighborhood.

The Red Hook Community Justice Center has incubated numerous new crime prevention programs over the years. In 2004, the Justice Center piloted an HIV/substance abuse prevention program that trained Red Hook youths to educate their peers. In 2008, the Justice Center ran a youth engagement program that engaged teenagers in public housing in creating education campaigns that addressed issues such as drug dealing and dropping out of school.

Each year, the Justice Center contributes approximately 70,000 hours of community service to Red Hook—about \$500,500 worth of labor. The percentage of residents who say they feel safe in local parks or on the street has risen significantly—from 45.6 percent in 2004 to 73.5 percent in 2010 (parks) and 40.8 to 54.5 percent (street).

Confidence in the courts has also increased among neighborhood residents—94 percent rate the Justice Center favorably (compared to only 12 percent who rated local courts favorably before the project opened). Indeed, door-to-door surveys have documented improved trust in police and prosecutors as well. And defendants in the Justice Center are significantly more likely to perceive their experience in the court system as fair than defendants in traditional court.

Red Hook is a safer, more prosperous neighborhood today than it was when the Justice Center opened. Once notorious for drugs and crime, the neighborhood is now home to the safest police precinct in Brooklyn.

### ***South Dallas Community Court***

The city of Dallas has three operating community courts. The South Dallas Community Court was the first community court to open in Dallas and began hearing cases on October 1, 2004. The community court originally started as an initiative of the Dallas City Attorney’s Office and works closely with the community prosecution program as well as the city’s municipal court.

The South Dallas Community Court serves a high-poverty neighborhood and is housed in the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center. The community center had been open for some 20 years, and already housed approximately 25 programs such as workforce development, a public library, and a gymnasium. Partnering with a vibrant community center allowed Dallas to start a community court on a modest budget, and an existing community prosecution program accelerated the pace at which community input could be included in the court's planning process.

The South Dallas Community Court has initiated a number of creative partnerships, including a weekly reentry docket to tackle the challenges faced by individuals returning to the community from jail, a community service program for truant youths, and collaborations with law enforcement agencies, faith-based organizations, and social service providers to work with prostitutes and combat active drug markets.

The success of the South Dallas Community Court spawned the opening of a second community court in West Dallas (opened November 2008) and a third community court in the South Oak Cliff neighborhood of Dallas (opened April 2010). The two newest community courts are using the model established by the South Dallas Community Court: a courtroom in an existing community center.

### ***Seattle Community Court***

In 2002, the Municipal Court of Seattle opened its doors in a new downtown Seattle Justice Center, which includes a resource center containing social service providers and a day care center. As time went on, the court and its justice system partners found that having service providers in the building presented a unique opportunity to adapt the community court model.

Launched in 2005, the Seattle Community Court, with an original jurisdiction limited to the downtown business area, has sought to demonstrate how community court principles can be implemented to address the problems of defendants who are chronically homeless, frequently suffer from multiple addictions, and often have a co-occurring mental illness.

The Seattle Community Court expanded its jurisdiction in January 2007 to include the entire city of Seattle. With the increased caseload came a greater need for community service projects. Originally the community court had two community service partners, and the community service workers were supervised by the partners themselves. Today, the community court has more than 16 community service partners. AmeriCorps volunteers, who undergo specialized training, now do most of the supervision. The grant manager for the community court, an employee of the city attorney's office, is responsible for coordinating which workers will be at which sites and making sure all the community service partnerships are running smoothly. The caseload of the community court has risen from 228 defendants in its first year of operation to nearly 900.

In addition to helping to oversee community service, AmeriCorps volunteers help to conduct community outreach, including the production of a quarterly electronic newsletter and web-based community satisfaction surveys.

### ***Bronx Community Solutions***

Launched in 2005, Bronx Community Solutions seeks to provide judges in the county's central criminal courthouse with increased sentencing options for non-violent offenses such as drug possession, prostitution, and shoplifting.

By combining punishment with help, Bronx Community Solutions seeks to reduce the Bronx's reliance on short-term jail sentences and build public confidence that the system is holding offenders accountable and offering them the assistance they need to avoid further criminal conduct. The project builds on the lessons from community courts in the Red Hook, Midtown, and Harlem neighborhoods of New York City.

Bronx Community Solutions is testing whether core community court features—enhanced sentencing options, community service, increased accountability, and community engagement—can be applied in a large central court that serves a population of nearly 1.4 million people. Rather than working with one judge or a single courtroom, Bronx Community Solutions provides all judges in the Bronx with a broad set of sentencing options, including drug treatment, job training, family services, and mental health counseling. Offenders are assigned to community service work in neighborhoods throughout the Bronx. Project staff work with residents and community groups to create community service options that respond to local problems (for example, trash in a local park or walls marred by graffiti). By quickly assigning offenders to social service and community service sentences, and rigorously monitoring their compliance, Bronx Community Solutions sends the message that community-based sanctions are taken seriously.

Bronx Community Solutions invites community groups and local residents to play a number of concrete roles in ongoing operations, including identifying hot spots and eye sores for community service projects, and participating in a neighborhood advisory board. Since the project's inception, key program staff have documented the experiment through a frequently updated blog, "Changing the Court."

Bronx Community Solutions handles approximately 12,000 cases per year.

### ***Orange County Community Court***

A one-of-a-kind experiment in Santa Ana, California, the Orange County Community Court brings under one roof a number of specialized court dockets that would typically be scattered over several courtrooms in a centralized courthouse. This includes an adult drug court, a mental health court, a court for those charged with driving under the influence of alcohol, a veterans court, a domestic violence court, and a homeless court. Each docket is heard on different days of the week.

Participants enroll in the court—housed in a former department store decorated with Mexican tiles and a vintage floor-to-ceiling mural—either through a court mandate or on a walk-in basis (a sandwich board out front promotes the free services available inside). The drug court and mental health court currently have an active caseload of about 200 participants and the homeless court close to 400.

The community court opened in August 2008 (many of the specialized court projects were already in existence). Judge Wendy Lindley was a natural choice for the program, having presided over the Santa Ana Drug Court and an earlier version of the homeless court.

Significantly, Judge Lindley also spearheaded the court's community planning process, which included one-on-one interviews with 30 key stakeholders, focus groups with social service providers, faith-based groups, and criminal justice professionals, and town hall meetings open to the public (one of which was conducted in Spanish).

One example of Orange County's innovative approach is the veterans court, which started in November 2008. Based on the pioneering example set by the Buffalo Veterans Court, Judge Lindley seeks to link returning veterans suffering from problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, or other mental health conditions to long-term treatment. The court works closely with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which has assigned a full-time case manager to the project.

Orange County's outreach court is designed to address the unique issues posed by individuals who are homeless. The program clears up arrest warrants issued for homeless people who are unable to pay fines accrued when they are cited for low-level offenses like sleeping outside or urinating in public. The idea is to reduce both inefficient and costly short-term jail sentences (if enforced, warrants often result in a few days jail), while removing barriers to self-sufficiency (an arrest warrant can prevent an individual from obtaining a drivers license or job). In the outreach court, Judge Lindley sentences individuals to drug rehabilitation or parenting classes as an alternative to a fine. In addition, Judge Lindley conducts outreach court in homeless shelters, where residents are encouraged to bring warrants to the court's attention.

## CONCLUSION

There are currently 37 community courts in the United States, with more planned in the days to come.

The local nature of community justice means that each court tells a different story. In Portland, community court was a natural outgrowth of the neighborhood prosecutor program launched by Multnomah County District Attorney Michael Shrunk. In Hartford, Connecticut, the community court emerged from a process designed to solicit greater community involvement in setting law enforcement priorities. Community members urged the justice system to focus attention on quality-of-life crimes.

No matter what the initial motivation, community courts in the U.S. have sought to bridge the gap between courts and the communities they've served. Along the way, they've taught practitioners lessons about improving the visibility and transparency of the work of the justice system and responding creatively to community needs.

Community courts have produced documented cost savings through the reduced use of incarceration and through community service work performed by defendants. Community courts have also helped boost public confidence in justice. Just as important, community courts across the country have served as laboratories, providing local criminal justice officials with the space to experiment with new approaches to public safety. At the end



of the day, this commitment to innovation—to testing new ideas and evaluating their effectiveness—is the lasting contribution that community courts have made to justice reform in the United States.

## FURTHER READING

For more information, visit the Center for Court Innovation’s web site, [www.courtinnovation.org](http://www.courtinnovation.org), which contains dozens of articles, interviews, research reports, and other materials for community court planners. All of the materials listed below are available for free download:

*Building Support for Justice Initiatives: A Communications Toolkit*

by Jimena Martinez

A manual to help justice practitioners communicate about their work with the public and key institutional stakeholders.

*Community Courts: A Review of the Research Literature*

by Kelli Henry and Dana Kralstein

A review, updated in July 2010, of the basic findings from the most notable community court evaluations conducted to date.

*Community Justice Around the Globe: An International Overview*

by Robert V. Wolf

A review of community court and community prosecution programs around the world. Originally published in *Crime & Justice International*.

*Defining the Problem: Using Data to Plan a Community Justice Project*

by Robert V. Wolf

A look at how community justice initiatives across the county have used concrete data to define local problems.

*Engaging the Community: A Guide for Community Justice Planners*

by David Anderson and Greg Berman

Tips for community justice planners about how to build stronger connections between neighborhoods and the criminal justice system.

*Examining Defendant Perceptions of Fairness in the Courtroom*

by M. Somjen Frazer

An article highlighting the major findings of a study of defendant perceptions of fairness at the Red Hook Community Justice Center. Originally published in *Judicature*.

*From the Margins to the Mainstream: Community Justice at the Crossroads*

by Greg Berman and Aubrey Fox

An edited transcript of a discussion about community justice among a small group of leading practitioners and thinkers.

*How It Works: A Summary of Case Flow and Interventions at the Midtown Community Court*

A detailed description of how cases move through the Midtown Community Court.

*Red Hook Diary: Planning a Community Court*

by Greg Berman

How a planner for a neighborhood-based court in Brooklyn negotiated some of the early challenges of the project, including community needs assessment, fund-raising, and program design.

*The Principles of Community Justice: A Guide for Community Court Planners*

by Greg Berman

A discussion of the principles underlying community courts.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

The Center for Court Innovation seeks to help justice officials around the country reduce crime and improve public trust in justice. In New York, the Center functions as the court system's independent research and development arm, creating demonstration projects that test new ideas. The Center's projects include community courts, drug courts, reentry courts, domestic violence courts and mental health courts. Beyond New York, the Center disseminates the lessons learned from innovative programs, helping criminal justice reformers around the world launch their own problem-solving experiments.

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### **Center for Court Innovation**

The winner of the Peter F. Drucker Award for Non-profit Innovation, the Center for Court Innovation is a unique public-private partnership that promotes new thinking about how the justice system can solve difficult problems like addiction, quality-of-life crime, domestic violence, and child neglect. The Center functions as the New York State court system's independent research and development arm, creating demonstration projects that test new approaches to problems that have resisted conventional solutions. The Center's demonstration projects include the nation's first community court (Midtown Community Court), as well as drug courts, domestic violence courts, youth courts, mental health courts, reentry courts and others.

Beyond New York, the Center disseminates the lessons learned from its experiments in New York, helping court reformers around the world test new solutions to local problems. The Center contributes to the international conversation about justice through original research, books, monographs, and roundtable conversations that bring together leading academics and practitioners. The Center also provides hands-on technical assistance, advising innovators about program design, technology and performance measures.

**For more information, call 646 386 3100 or e-mail [info@courtinnovation.org](mailto:info@courtinnovation.org).**

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