

HOW 10 COURTS ARE REDEFINING COMMUNITY JUSTICE

Community courts are neighborhood-focused programs that combine the power of the community and the justice system to address local problems. They connect people who have committed minor crimes to judicially supervised drug treatment and other community-based services, including community restitution.

As with other problem-solving courts, the community court model has matured since its founding more than 25 years ago. A central purpose of community courts is to be highly engaged with the communities they serve. As a result, each local program is unique.

This publication captures some of the latest developments and challenges in community justice. It tracks ten community courts that have received support from the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance and the Center for Court Innovation. These sites are seeking to do their work in new physical environments, serve new populations, engage new partners and use new tools.

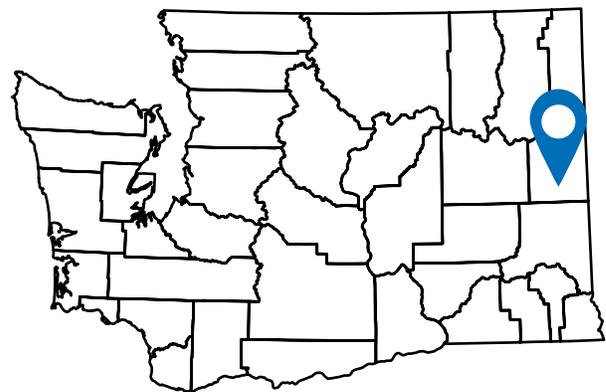
NEW SPACES

Programs like the Midtown Community Court and Red Hook Community Justice Center pioneered the concept of operating in a stand-alone, community-based facility. The benefits of this approach are numerous, but logistics prevent many jurisdictions from creating stand-alone community courts. Some jurisdictions have instead made use of existing community resource hubs—such as community centers and even local libraries—to house their community courts. For others, the ideal location is right within the traditional downtown courthouse, which poses its own opportunities and challenges.

Embedded within a downtown public library

1. SPOKANE'S DOWNTOWN COMMUNITY COURT, WASHINGTON

Opened in 2013, Spokane's Downtown Community Court operates out of a public library in an effort to better reach low-level repeat defendants and connect them to services. Spokane then opened a second location—the Northeast Community Court—in an existing community center in 2017. In late 2018, the Center for Court Innovation, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance,



Spokane's Downtown Community Court

Washington

designated the Downtown Community Court as a mentor court for jurisdictions seeking to enhance procedural justice, promote the use of community justice, and offer alternatives to jail where appropriate.

Challenge: The court's intended participants had high failure-to-appear rates. The planning process revealed that many were already using services at the local downtown library, which had become a resource hub for people experiencing homelessness.

Response: Because of the library’s preexisting services, community court planners recognized that it would make an ideal home for the new court and its service providers. The court’s library setting situates the judge in the community and allows for a less formal approach. This encourages attendance for people who might find the traditional courthouse intimidating. The program supports participants by bringing additional services into the building on court days, offering incentives for positive steps and holding a graduation ceremony to provide positive reinforcement.



At Spokane’s Downtown Community Court, participants and others seeking services line up for security and check-in in the lobby of the Downtown Spokane Public Library, where weekly court sessions are held.

Embedded within the downtown courthouse

2. CLEVELAND COMMUNITY COURT, OHIO

The Cleveland Municipal Court implemented a community court handling nonviolent misdemeanors from anywhere in the city or in the neighboring Village of Bratenahl.



Cleveland Community Court

Ohio

Challenge: Based within the downtown courthouse, the community court relied on receiving referrals post-arraignment from other courtrooms in the Municipal Court. Cleveland already had a robust network of problem-solving court dockets. Although none of these other courts tackled lower-level cases, they all had overlapping relationships with the same set of service providers and used similar alternative sentencing approaches. Community court planners needed to set clear guidelines for the cases the program was best suited to handle while also being open to the program evolving to meet changing needs.

Response: Being housed within the downtown courthouse helped facilitate communication with other court partners. Sharing the community court’s successes and inviting observation of its sessions helped to improve buy-in, as did the court’s efforts to refer cases to specialized calendars in other courtrooms. There is now much greater understanding of how the community court assists low-level defendants, and it has seen an increase in judicial referrals, especially among high-need, “revolving door” populations experiencing homelessness and mental disorders.

NEW POPULATIONS

Some community courts have sought to expand by offering their services to new and more diverse populations, including young adults with more serious charges, and people experiencing homelessness.

Young adults

3. SECOND CHANCE COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM, DALLAS COUNTY, TEXAS

Dallas was already home to four community courts when it set out to engage a new, historically challenging population: young adults, ages 17 to 25, arrested on non-violent misdemeanor or felony charges. Cases are heard at the South Dallas Community Court rather than the county courthouse, and the court team includes a mental health professional. Participants are assessed for service needs, assigned to substance use, mental health and other treatment, and are eligible to have their cases dismissed after successfully completing the three phases of the program.

Challenge: At first, the court struggled to attract participants. Many potentially eligible defendants were pleading out their cases without being aware of the new option. Another challenge was this population's pervasive distrust of the system. This complicated efforts to convince the local defense bar that this new alternative was a better option for their clients than the traditional process.



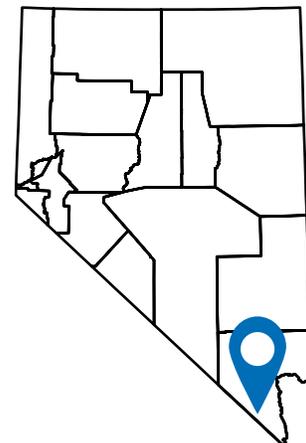
Response: The court worked with the district attorney's office to implement a process whereby a case manager and law school interns contacted potential participants—either directly or through their defense counsel—to give them information about the program and their eligibility. They also posted flyers in the court to encourage magistrate judges to provide program information to defendants. Other changes also helped to connect participants with defense counsel earlier in the process. As a result of these process changes, the number of participants increased by 50 percent.

People experiencing homelessness

4. LAS VEGAS TOWNSHIP COMMUNITY COURT, NEVADA

Las Vegas Township launched a community court in 2017 to serve a corridor that faces high rates of poverty, homelessness, mental and substance use disorders, and low-level crime.

Challenge: As with many American cities, housing stability is a struggle for many people in Las Vegas. Historically, the justice system has sometimes done more harm than good in responding to homelessness. Building trust among the city's homeless population was a challenge for the Las Vegas community court.



The program found participants were reluctant to use services located within the courthouse. The location, which was difficult for many defendants to reach, also lacked a “community resource” feel.

Response: The community court relocated its operations to a community-based facility near the Las Vegas Strip that feels more like a true community center. It has improved access to resources for participants and reinforced the court’s engagement with local short-term housing providers. The move has also made it easier for participants to attend their scheduled court hearings,

which has helped to improve trust. In addition, planners worked hard to build relationships with community-based service providers. The message has spread through the community by word of mouth, and the court has seen a significant increase in the number of court participants—and even community members without court cases—seeking services. Over the past year, the number of defendants opting into the program has more than doubled compared to its first year of operation, and the “Community Impact Center” where the court is located draws an average of 15 people without court cases each day seeking services.

People experiencing homelessness

5. HONOLULU COMMUNITY OUTREACH COURT, HAWAII

The Honolulu Prosecuting Attorney’s Office, in partnership with the district court and the office of the public defender, launched the Community Outreach Court in 2017. The court seeks to resolve lower-level offenses with community service and links to social services.

Challenge: Honolulu has the highest per capita rate of homelessness in the country. There is limited public transportation on the island. Program planners sought to incentivize defendants and other people in need to use available social services, but only a fraction would appear in person.

Response: Honolulu has expanded its operations to serve a greater portion of the city—and outlying rural areas—through a mobile outreach model. The court program is also structured in a way that minimizes required court appearances, in hopes that this will help participants experiencing homelessness.



NEW ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Community engagement is crucial to community courts. This can include community advisory boards, neighborhood associations, volunteer programs, resource fairs, and other forums. Community engagement can also involve listening to participants in order to improve programs. Activities such as these ensure community court programming is responsive to local needs and gives a voice to service recipients.

6. RESTORATIVE JUSTICE COMMUNITY COURT, COOK COUNTY, ILLINOIS

The Circuit Court of Cook County implemented a community court serving young adults ages 18 to 26 in the North Lawndale neighborhood on Chicago’s West Side. In addition to linking participants to services, the court uses restorative justice conferences to offer responsible parties the chance to repair the harm they have caused.

Challenge: To ensure effective restorative justice conferences, planners had to establish trust and understanding between the court and community partners. This meant educating community groups about the court's responsibility and culture. Court players had to understand the expectations and capacity of the community. And all the players had to agree on what their role would be going forward.



Restorative Justice
Community Court

Cook County, Illinois

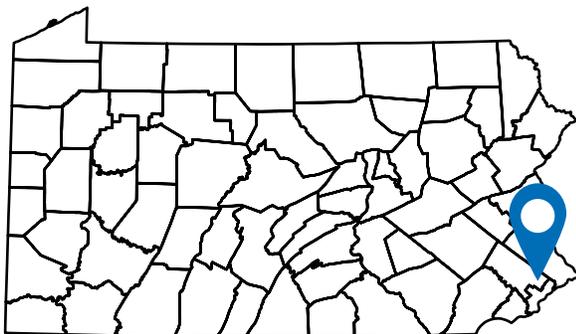
Response: To accomplish these goals, the program engaged the services of a third-party facilitator. This proved crucial to establishing lines of communication, articulating shared goals, and developing working relationships.



Staff and community partners of the Restorative Justice Community Court on Chicago's west side debrief in a circle meeting after a day of hearings.

7. PHILADELPHIA ACCELERATED MISDEMEANOR PROGRAM, PENNSYLVANIA

The Philadelphia Mental Health Care Corporation, in partnership with the municipal court, district attorney's office, and Defender Association of Philadelphia, enhanced the city's neighborhood-based Accelerated Misdemeanor Program courts by improving participant access to mental health services.



Philadelphia Accelerated Misdemeanor Program

Pennsylvania

Challenge: The project hired a mental health counselor. The counselor initially faced challenges engaging participants in the program, particularly men.

Response: Philadelphia launched a pilot using a "certified peer specialist" to help jump-start participant engagement and raise awareness among justice-system representatives about the enhanced mental health services. Over time, court representatives became more comfortable with the mental health counselor and used him more readily. The program grew steadily over time and Philadelphia is now working on building a Medicaid-funded team of certified peer specialists to support the Accelerated Misdemeanor Program and other problem-solving courts.

MAKING BETTER CONNECTIONS WITH COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

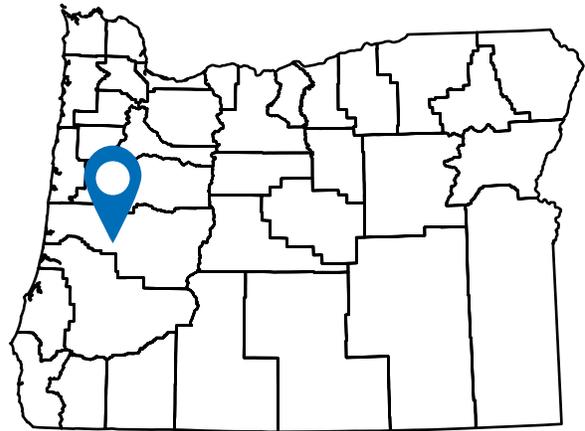
Courts and probation agencies have used risk-need assessments for decades to inform decisions about supervision and placement. These tools can be controversial and challenging to implement but, when used properly, they can help community courts such as the two described below allocate limited resources efficiently and safeguard against over-programming with the lowest-risk cases.

8. EUGENE COMMUNITY COURT, OREGON

Eugene implemented a community court to serve the city's downtown core, seeking to resolve misdemeanors and violations through community service and social service mandates. Following the model pioneered by Spokane, the court hears its weekly sessions in the downtown library, which provides a separate room for service providers.

Challenge: The court originally served a small geographic area. After piloting the model, it sought to expand to serve more people. As the court grew, it quickly experienced needs for additional staffing and space to conduct assessments of defendants.

Response: The court tried a combination of different approaches to meet the increased demand. Ultimately the most effective was to use existing court staff resources, stagger appearance dates and times, and shift scheduling to prioritize the operations of community court. Wait times have been reduced significantly. Recently, the court received approval to add staff, with funding coming from a new payroll tax intended to fund the community justice system.



Eugene Community Court

Oregon

9. OLYMPIA COMMUNITY COURT, WASHINGTON

Olympia's municipal court implemented a community court handling lower-level offenses committed in the downtown core. The Olympia Community Court operates every Wednesday morning. The court repurposed an empty building to house a variety of service providers under one roof, all within a few minutes' walk from the courtroom. Currently, on community court days, the building houses 16 service providers.

Challenge: Early challenges faced by the Olympia Community Court included figuring out how to coordinate the work of service providers and determining how compliance should be monitored and reported.



Participants at work in a community garden maintained by the Olympia Community Court, growing fresh vegetables for court clients as well as local food banks.

Response: The court hired a part-time case manager and eventually increased their hours from 16 to 24 hours/week. The case manager was responsible for calling participants in between court dates and following up with service providers. The court also developed a

secure email system for the case manager to report non-compliance, relieving the local probation department of much of its reporting burden. These adjustments enabled the court to improve compliance monitoring, participant engagement, and timely case processing.



Olympia Community Court

Washington



At a celebration of his graduation, an Olympia Community Court participant selects a location to pin his name.

COORDINATING WITH OTHER JUSTICE REFORMS

Community courts exist within larger ecosystems. The success of any community court depends upon its ability to coordinate with other reforms to the justice system.

resources and created a comprehensive resource directory for community court participants. As a result, there has been overwhelming interest from community organizations and resource providers to collaborate with the program. Jersey City Community Solutions has now become a resource hub within the city.

10. JERSEY CITY COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS, NEW JERSEY

Jersey City implemented a community court calendar in its municipal courthouse, in which 75 percent of cases heard are lower-level offenses. The resulting project—Jersey City Community Solutions—serves the entire city with a single judge. Over the course of its planning period, the court identified existing community



Jersey City
Community Solutions

New Jersey

Challenge: Planning for Jersey City Community Solutions overlapped with another local justice reform: bail reform. System stakeholders were busy implementing new policies and procedures associated with new state bail laws, and the changing landscape made it difficult to establish new community court practices at the same time. For example, initial program designs for the community court assumed that many eligible defendants would be in custody. With bail reform, however, most eligible participants were given notices to appear or released on their own recognizance, which required rethinking the referral pathways for community court.

Response: Jersey City’s planning team developed flowcharts to outline their case process that included all the steps from arrest to community court program enrollment. These resources helped the planning team stay organized about practice changes as they evolved, an example of iterative design at work.

CONCLUSION

While the goal of crafting locally-driven responses to local problems has remained the same over the more than two decades of community courts operating in the U.S., the model has evolved considerably, capitalizing on new opportunities and lessons learned, and responding to an ever-shifting world of criminal justice reform. This document has focused on how some courts are using new spaces, engagement strategies, and stronger connections to community-based services, to both improve outcomes for existing populations they work with, and expand their reach to new, often harder-to-reach ones.

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