



## **Community Court** *A problem solving approach to chronic low-level offenders*

**What is a Community Court?** A community court is a problem solving court that engages the public in efforts to address problems facing the community. When addressing the problem of chronic offending, community courts seek to impose immediate sanctions on chronic low-level offenders while helping offenders address complex problems that underlie the criminal behavior, e.g. homelessness, alcohol or drug dependency, and mental illness. The hallmarks of the community court are: Enhanced risk and need assessments of offenders prior to seeing the judge; community engagement in defining problems and providing input on where community service is needed; collaboration among the justice participants (judge, prosecutor, defense, probation, community social services, and community service sites); linkage of offenders to appropriate community-based services, and; immediate community service requirements to hold offenders accountable.

**What are Spokane City and County Doing Now?** Spokane Municipal Court has completed all of the planning for a Community Court, but has not yet implemented the plan. Spokane County District Court does not have a Community Court.

**What are Other City and Counties Doing?** Some 37 U.S. cities have community courts. The first was established in Midtown Manhattan in 1993. Seattle Municipal Community Court began in 2005. The courts are located in court houses, in community centers and in free standing community justice centers. Many, like Seattle, have on-site resource centers housing social services and community service coordinators so that the offender's likelihood of fulfilling the court ordered requirements is enhanced.

**How do Community Courts function?** The Seattle Municipal Community Court has been named as a mentor court and provides assistance to other communities interested in establishing community courts. As a mentor court, it provides a good model. In the Seattle Community Court, chronic low-level misdemeanor offenders are screened for eligibility, probation does a complete risk and need assessment of the offender, the Community Court program is explained to the offender, the Community Court Team reviews the risk and need assessment, and a determination is made as to whether the offender will be offered a disposition continuance while he or she completes the requirements of the court. The offender must agree to participate. Between 2008 and 2011, 72% (3302) of the offenders who could participate chose to do so.

The Community Court participant is assigned community service hours, at projects often related to the offense or to the person's own social service needs. Seattle has 20 different agencies where full-day community service is completed. At half of those sites, AmeriCorps volunteers directly supervise the offenders. The offenders are provided transportation to the site, lunch, and bus fare home. Since 2005, offenders have completed 51,711 hours of service to the community.

The participant is also required to link with appropriate social services like housing, mental health treatment, education, drug/alcohol treatment, employment training or assistance, health services, DSHS services, etc. In Seattle, since 2005, 15,578 social service referrals have been made - primarily to DSHS, drug treatment, employment resources, and housing and mental health resources. If the offender completes the requirements of the program, the criminal charges can be dismissed. Between 2008 and 2011, 53% (1726) of the offenders successfully completed the program. If the program is not completed, the offender proceeds to plea and sentencing.

**How Can Spokane City and County Improve?** Spokane Municipal Court should implement its plan for a Community Court. An assessment should be conducted to determine if the District Court could also benefit from a Community Court.

### **How will Spokane City and County Benefit by Implementing these Changes?**

- Jail Cost Savings: The Seattle Office of Policy and Management calculated that the jail stay between arraignment and first hearing was reduced from 19 days to 6 days for Community Court participants, resulting in a net savings in the first year of \$192,198. The net jail savings through 2009 is estimated at \$1,672,637. A day in the Spokane County Jail costs \$120. Any reduction in days in jail will result in net savings.
- System Cost Savings: Seattle reports Community Court efficiencies that could benefit Spokane: Faster resolution of cases, shorter length of jurisdiction, fewer cases set for pretrial and trial, less public defense cost, and lower case load for trial attorneys. Fewer hearings are required for failures to appear in court and for failing to comply with court ordered sanctions.
- Improved public trust in courts, police, prosecutors: A study done at the Redhook Community Justice Center in Brooklyn, N.Y showed that after the Center came into existence, residents felt safer and approval ratings increased from 1999 to 2001 as follows: Police -15% to 37%, District Attorneys -12% to 32% and courts -12% to 38%. The perception of the fairness of the justice system among offenders also increased.
- Value of community service. Community Court participants provide large numbers of hours of community service, often working shoulder to shoulder with community volunteers. If labor is valued at \$7/hr, Seattle will have received \$361,977 in community services from Community Court participants. (\$7/hr x 51,711 hrs.). Seattle neighborhood groups express their appreciation for the work the Community Court participants accomplish in cleaning up litter, removing graffiti, planting and caring for trees, assisting with community gardens, and providing services to the homeless.
- Sentencing alternatives for other judges. When the community service coordination is in place, and the resource center is available to provide linkage with needed social services, judges in courts other than community court, have more quality sentencing alternatives available to them. Thus, sentencing can be individualized to the offender.
- Reduced Rate of Repeat Offenses. In a study of Seattle Community Court participants compared to a control group 18 months after completion of the program, 80% of both groups committed new offenses. Given the extensive criminal histories of the offenders this was not surprising. However, there was a 67% reduction in the average number of offenses per defendant after community court as compared to a 50% increase in the control group. The conclusion is that

community court participants re-offend at a significantly lower rate than offenders who do not participate in a community court program.

## **Personal Story**

A Seattle Community Court participant said the following about his experience:

"Instead of sitting in jail and doing nothing it was nice to go out and see the different things to be worked on. Seeing and hearing the public appreciation (for what) we were doing was great. It was not an easy time but it felt that it was time well-spent. I had time to reflect on what had gone on and my part in it. As far as punitive measures go I think this had much more impact than sitting in jail."

"The program has introduced me to housing services and DESC case-manager. So after 10 years I finally have housing and [a] case-manager."

## **Links for More Information:**

Watch a video about Community Courts: <http://www.courtinnovation.org/research/testing-new-ideas-evidence-innovation-and-community-courts?url=research%2Fbrowse%2Fall%2Fpopular&mode=browse&type=all&sort=popular>

## **Sources of Information:**

Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, Community-Based Problem Solving Criminal Justice Initiative, [https://www.bja.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?Program\\_ID=53](https://www.bja.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?Program_ID=53)

Center for Court Innovation, <http://www.courtinnovation.org/research/4/all>

What is a Community Court? Julius Lang, 2011

Community Courts: The Research Literature, Kelli Henry & Dana Kralstein,

Seattle Community Court, <http://www.seattle.gov/com/> and Seattle Community Court Performance Updates, CC Steering Committee, 1/13/12

Justice Management Institute, Seattle Municipal Community Court, Outcome Evaluation Final Report, Oct. 2009, [http://www.seattle.gov/communitycourt/docs/JMI\\_study\\_10-09-09.pdf](http://www.seattle.gov/communitycourt/docs/JMI_study_10-09-09.pdf)

## **Compiled by:**

Mary Lou Johnson, Attorney & Julie Schaffer, Attorney for Center for Justice

**For more information on the Smart Justice Campaign go to [www.smartjusticespokane.org](http://www.smartjusticespokane.org), or contact:**

Greater Spokane Progress, Anne Martin, Director, (509) 624-5657, [anne@spokaneprogess.org](mailto:anne@spokaneprogess.org)  
Center for Justice, Julie Schaffer, Attorney, (509) 835-5211, [jschaffer@cforjustice.org](mailto:jschaffer@cforjustice.org)

