

Alternative Courts: Innovative and Restorative Public Safety Approaches

Public safety stakeholders in our region have a long history of responding to crime with innovative strategies such as intelligence-led policing, specialty courts (i.e., Reentry Court, Drug Court, Mandatory Supervision, Veteran's Court, and Behavioral Health Court) and community courts. These creative solutions are increasingly important as the local criminal justice system faces new and on-going challenges, including additional responsibilities associated with public safety realignment.

Community courts, the focus of this CJ Fax, were first implemented over ten years ago in the City of San Diego. With the majority of arrests being misdemeanors, these lower-level crimes (i.e., graffiti, alcohol violations, and disturbing the peace) clog the court system, take valuable patrol time, and affect the public's quality of life. The San Diego City Attorney's Neighborhood Prosecution Unit (NPU), in partnership with the San Diego Police Department and community leaders, implemented community courts to combat these crimes. This alternative justice strategy imposes sanctions to restore harm to the community ("restorative justice") and bypasses the traditional judicial system, potentially saving tax dollars and freeing the system to focus on more serious crimes.

The first community court in the City of San Diego opened in 2002 in Downtown, followed by courts in Mid-City (2003)¹ and the Beach Area (2006). These courts impose relevant sanctions, in the form of community service work, that allow the offender to repair the harm their crime caused (i.e., paint over graffiti, pick up litter). If these conditions are successfully met, criminal charges are not filed against the offender, or if charges have been filed, the case is dismissed. While a judge determines the appropriate sanction at the Downtown court based on guidelines created in collaboration with justice partners, sanctions at Mid-City and Beach Area are decided with input from the community, illustrating the degree of collaboration between the NPU and neighborhoods heavily impacted by these types of crimes. Going a step further, the Beach Area community court requires offenders to attend an Impact Panel to hear community members describe how their quality of life is affected by these crimes. The NPU estimates that community service hours completed by offenders across the courts resulted in over \$108,000 worth of labor returned to these communities in 2012 (Table 1).²

Table 1
IMPACT OF QUALITY OF LIFE CRIMES ADDRESSED THROUGH COMMUNITY SERVICE

Location/Year Opened	Types of Crimes	# Cases Eligible in 2012	Hours of Community Service	Labor Returned
Downtown - 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Petty theft• Possession of marijuana• Pedi-cab violations	267	2,852	\$70,587
Beach Area - 2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Drunk in public and other alcohol-related offenses	350	1,546	\$38,264

SOURCE: San Diego City Attorney's Office, Neighborhood Prosecution Unit, 2013

Specialty and community courts are innovative approaches that have been implemented to save tax payer dollars while ensuring justice is served. The July CJ Fax will further highlight the variety of specialty courts currently in place around the County. Additional information regarding specialty courts and community courts can be obtained by contacting the San Diego County District Attorney's Office or the San Diego City Attorney's Office.

¹ Since 2011, the Mid-City Community Court has been temporarily closed for restructuring.

² Labor hours estimates based on Bureau of Labor Statistics formula. Retrieved June 26, 2013, from <http://www.independentsector.org>