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Community-Oriented Criminal Justice: Community Courts

Community courts are being implemented across the country as long-term solutions to quality-of-life crime problems. The first community court was introduced as a three-year experimental project in Midtown Manhattan in 1993. The court proved successful in reducing misdemeanor crime and improving the quality of life of the community. Since then, community courts have been developed in jurisdictions across the country. Community courts are decentralized, neighborhood courts that adopt the philosophy of community-oriented criminal justice. The U.S. Department of Justice defines community courts as community-focused, problem-solving, accessible, proactive initiatives that link the adjudication process with communities, and combine punishment with help.¹ Community courts share three common principles, including accountability of offenders to the community victimized by quality-of-life crimes, proactive intervention to stop chronic criminal conduct, and direct involvement of the community in the criminal justice process. Community courts are effective in addressing quality-of-life crime issues because they link the adjudication process with communities, and combine punitive sanctions with rehabilitative sentencing alternatives.

San Diego City Attorney's Office Community Court Programs

San Diego is the first jurisdiction in Southern California to have implemented fully operational community courts. The Downtown Community Court was launched in October 2002; the Mid-City Community Court was launched in February 2003; and the Beach Area Community Court was launched in August 2006.

Downtown Community Court:

The Downtown Community Court, a post-filing court, operates daily out of the Misdemeanor Arraignment Department of the San Diego Superior Court at 220 West Broadway. The San Diego City Attorney's Office, as the City's misdemeanor prosecutor, determines eligibility of offenders for the Community Court based on established guidelines and refers appropriate offenders to it. Eligible offenders who commit misdemeanor crimes in the 2.2 square mile downtown area, including petty theft, graffiti, trespass, drinking in public, simple

¹ *Community Courts: A Manual of Principles*, published by the Center for Court Innovation, New York, NY, and the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Washington, D.C.

battery, disorderly conduct; drunk in public, resisting arrest (minor or no physical injury), vandalism, possession of marijuana, and some San Diego Municipal code sections, may opt to participate in the Downtown Community Court. Offenders are cited by the San Diego Police Department to report to San Diego Superior Court. At that time, the offender is counseled on the options available regarding the charge. If the offender accepts a community court offer, the offender pleads guilty to the charge and is ordered to perform community work service downtown. The Downtown San Diego Partnership's Clean and Safe Program supervises the work service. The Downtown Community Court Coordinator monitors offenders for six and/or eighteen months and provides referrals to social services as needed. If offenders comply with all terms of plea agreement within the six or eighteen month probationary period (complete the work service, pay court fines, and remain law-abiding) the People will motion the court to dismiss.

Mid-City Community Court:

The Mid-City Community Court, a pre-filing court, serves twelve communities in the Mid-City area of San Diego. The Court is held monthly at the San Diego Police Department's Multi-Cultural Community Relations Office at 5348 University Avenue in City Heights. The San Diego City Attorney's Office, as the City's misdemeanor prosecutor, determines eligibility of offenders for the Community Court based on established guidelines and refers appropriate offenders to it. Eligible offenders who commit misdemeanor quality-of-life crimes in Mid-City, such as prostitution, noise/disturbing the peace, social host, graffiti, vandalism, urination in public, trespass, possession of marijuana, and some San Diego Municipal code sections, are eligible to participate in the Mid-City Community Court. Participating offenders are sanctioned by the Community Court Sanctioning Panel, which is composed of a prosecutor, coordinator, and three trained community volunteers. Sanctions include administrative fees, community work service, impact panels, educational and/or rehabilitative programs, community meetings, and neighborhood clean ups. If offenders remain law-abiding for one year and complete the sanctions imposed, they avoid having formal criminal charges filed against them.

Beach Area Community Court:

The San Diego City Attorney's Office is a current recipient of a grant award from the United States Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Assistance, under the FY 2005 Community-Based Problem-Solving Criminal Justice Initiative. This grant funding was awarded for the purpose of planning and implementing the Beach Area Community Court. Since then, our office has worked in partnership with the San Diego Police Department, San Diego Superior Court, other criminal justice agencies, and community-based organizations to launch this court.

The Beach Area Community Court is a pre-filing court model. This prosecutorial diversion program is held monthly for adult offenders who commit misdemeanors and infractions, especially low-level alcohol-related offenses, which impact quality of life in San Diego beach communities of Pacific Beach, Mission Beach, and Mission Bay Park. The San

Diego City Attorney's Office determines eligibility of offenders for the Community Court based on established guidelines. Eligible offenders who choose to participate are diverted from the San Diego Superior Court. Offenders are held accountable to the community by attending a community impact panel and performing community work service. As part of Beach Area Community Court, offenders participate in a brief substance abuse screening tool and obtain referrals to educational and rehabilitative programs to curb future criminal conduct. If offenders complete the community impact panel and work service, they avoid having formal criminal charges filed against them.

The Downtown, Mid-City, and Beach Area Community Courts give offenders the opportunity to repair the harm they have caused to communities by participating in community work service. The courts also provide referrals to community-based social service providers for rehabilitative, educational, and preventative programs to deter future criminal conduct. In addition, community members, community based organizations, and community stakeholders are all volunteers instrumentally involved in all three community courts through participation in Advisory Boards. The advisory board members volunteer to serve and oversee the development and progress of the courts. They dedicated contributions ensure that the courts meet the needs of the communities they serve. For more information on the San Diego City Attorney's Office Community Court, contact Regan Savalla, Head Deputy City Attorney, Neighborhood Prosecution Unit, at (619) 533-5682.