

Neighborhood Knowledge

Community Prosecution in Washington D.C.



Written by

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Introduction

Long before the label was coined, the Office of the United States Attorney for the District of Columbia was experimenting with practices now commonly associated with “community prosecution.” In the 1970s, assistant U.S. attorneys began using vertical prosecution — in which a single prosecutor follows a case from indictment to sentencing — to deal with chronic offenders. And faced with the crack epidemic in the 1980s and 90s, the office discovered the value of assigning cases geographically: prosecutors who focused on a single neighborhood were able to build better cases and solve more crimes

Expanding on this foundation, U.S. Attorney Eric H. Holder Jr. launched a formal community prosecution pilot project in 1996. Holder was disturbed by the public’s lack of confidence in the criminal justice system, so the pilot emphasized partnerships with local communities, and called upon staff to measure success differently: not by the number of cases processed, but by meaningful improvements to the public’s sense of safety.

What emerged from that three-year pilot project was a unique brand of community prosecution. While many jurisdictions around the country view community prosecution mainly as a way to solve safety issues apart from the traditional work of prosecuting cases (whether by creating drug-free zones, as was done in Portland, Oregon, or partnering with city agencies to clean up nuisance properties, as was done in Indianapolis), the assistant U.S. attorneys in Washington D.C. have used the tools of community prosecution to *enhance* the traditional work of getting criminals off the streets.

In other words, the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Washington D.C. has found that the imperatives of community prosecution — fostering partnerships with local communities and focusing on neighborhood problems — have actually made it easier for them to build cases and obtain convictions.

The pilot project was so successful that in 1999 U.S. Attorney Wilma A. Lewis took the program officewide. By institutionalizing the pilot, Lewis has turned her office’s experiment into one of the most ambitious community prosecution programs in the country. Virtually every attorney in the office today is in some way touched by community prosecution.

This paper examines the Washington D.C. experience from the launching of the pilot to its officewide implementation. Why did the office begin to experiment with community prosecution? How has the office expanded the role of community

prosecution without sacrificing the efficiencies of traditional case processing? And how have planners dealt with resistance from skeptical front-line prosecutors? These are just some of the questions this paper answers as it highlights Washington D.C.'s unique contributions to community prosecution.

This paper is the fifth in a series published by the Center for Court Innovation and the Bureau of Justice Assistance at the U.S. Department of Justice about leading community prosecution programs around the country. The goal of this series is to focus attention on some of the best practices in this new but growing field.

Trying New Approaches

In many ways, Washington D.C. is an ideal setting for an experiment in community prosecution. The local U.S. Attorney's Office has a unique perspective because it handles not only all federal crimes in the District of Columbia, but, like a county district attorney's office, local crimes as well. As the largest U.S. Attorney's Office in the country, it has broad resources: 350 attorneys and more than 700 employees overall; in addition, it has access to a broader array of judicial remedies because it can prosecute cases in either local or federal courts. And then there's the city itself — a crime-burdened community in desperate need of new ideas for fighting crime.

The office didn't begin experimenting formally with community prosecution until 1996, but it had long demonstrated a willingness to try new approaches. In 1971, the office created the Chronic Offender Unit to deal with career criminals — the serial burglars and petty thugs who terrorized neighborhoods with crime sprees. Prosecutors decided that the most effective way to deal with these offenders was to have a single assistant U.S. attorney follow each case from start to finish, rather than hand a case off from attorney to attorney as it progressed through the system. This approach, called "vertical prosecution," allowed prosecutors to focus their attention on obtaining a conviction and ensured that key information didn't get lost along the way.

As it turned out, that 25-year-old experiment laid some of the groundwork for the office's foray into community prosecution. Vertical prosecution has been incorporated as a key feature of community prosecution because it "increases success dramatically," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Clifford T. Keenan, who co-led the community prosecution pilot project, and now works on promoting community prosecution nationally as special counsel for the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs. Among other things, vertical prosecution keeps prosecutors more accountable. "You live with your own mistakes," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Jennifer Anderson, who worked on the pilot project. "If you know you'll eventually have to try the case, you have an incentive to be as thorough as possible right from the start."

Violent Crimes

With the sudden and dramatic rise in violent crime brought on by crack in the mid-1980s, the office once again began to look for new solutions. Crack was generating new types of cases that were highly complex: they often involved young first-time offenders, networks of criminal players, victims who were also perpetrators, and wit-

nesses who were unwilling to cooperate for fear of retaliation. Keenan suggested that the Chronic Offender Unit be re-tooled to specialize in this new kind of violent crime. U.S. Attorney Jay B. Stephens agreed, and, under Keenan's supervision, the Violent Crimes Section was born.

At the outset, prosecutors in the Violent Crimes Section were assigned cases through random rotation, but Keenan felt that opportunities were being lost when, say, a shooting was assigned to one prosecutor, and the next week a shooting done in retaliation for the first one was given to someone else. "We had a system that whoever was on intake got all the cases, and the prosecutors rotated through intake on a weekly basis," Keenan recalled. "But I thought they were missing a chance to make connections between crimes. It made more sense to me to assign attorneys by police district."

So that's what Keenan did: Divide up the prosecutors in the Violent Crimes Section according to the city's seven police districts. In addition, Keenan screened all the cases coming into the section to make sure that assignments within each police district reflected interconnections between offenses, offenders and victims.

In this way, prosecutors were able to get better information about their cases. By focusing on a particular district and building relationships with individual police officers, the assistant U.S. attorneys developed a more sophisticated understanding of drug-trafficking schemes, gang rivalries, turf battles and the individual criminal personalities operating in their districts. The assignment of cases by district worked so well that the Homicide Section also reorganized itself along similar geographic lines.

Building a Bridge to the Community

In some ways, the Violent Crimes Section's emphasis on the importance of geography made it look like an experiment in community prosecution. The only thing that was missing was the community. While prosecutors were becoming more effective by building their knowledge about the criminal activities in the neighborhoods to which they were assigned, they weren't involved in the sort of community engagement — meeting with neighborhood leaders, attending civic meetings and building connections with local organizations — that is a hallmark of community prosecution today.

Things started changing in 1993, with the arrival of Eric H. Holder Jr., who succeeded Stephens as the U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia. Holder, a former federal prosecutor who in 1988 became a Superior Court judge in the District of Columbia, had long observed that prosecutors were hampered by public apathy and mistrust. As U.S. attorney, Holder felt it was his job to change citizens' attitudes, and so he started attending meetings in the community to learn about the public's concerns.

"One of his primary goals was to get to community meetings," Keenan recalled. "Prior to that, the U.S. attorney didn't live in D.C. and focused the office's work primarily at the federal level. But Holder, who lived in D.C., started attending community meetings where he heard from residents that things like abandoned cars and prostitution were big concerns."

Sharing Information

It was Holder's desire that the office be more responsive to community concerns that gave rise to the Community Prosecution Pilot Project. But there was another concern that also helped shape the experiment. For several years, Keenan and his staff in the Violent Crimes Section had been hampered by a lack of coordination among units. Specifically, the Homicide, Narcotics and Violent Crimes Sections often conducted separate investigations into interrelated cases, but when information surfaced that might be relevant to another section's work, it wasn't readily available.

"We couldn't get the chiefs of the sections to talk to each other, let alone their line assistants to talk to my line assistants," Keenan said. "One unit might be trying to solve a homicide, and the other learns that the homicide was over drugs, but that information never made it back to the first unit." As Assistant U.S. Attorney DeMaurice F. Smith, who participated in the pilot, put it: "You had different groups of highly specialized prosecutors working on the same problems, but they didn't share information."

Keenan brought his concerns to the table during the pilot project's planning phase. This helped ensure that the program that emerged addressed not only problems outside the office — particularly the public's lack of confidence in the U.S. Attorney's Office — but also problems within the office, such as the lack of coordination between sections.

After months of planning, Holder in June 1996 announced the creation of the Community Prosecution Pilot Project. "The United States Attorney's office will no longer be just a big concrete and glass building ... where people only go after they've been victimized," Holder said upon launching the pilot. "Our prosecutors will now have names and faces and phone numbers; they will be working right in the community they serve; and they will be teaming up with citizens to deter crime before it occurs."

The Pilot Project

The pilot, led by Keenan and Assistant U.S. Attorney Brenda Johnson, was based in the fifth of D.C.'s seven police districts and brought together 15 senior assistant U.S. attorneys from throughout the office. It was distinguished by four main features:

Community Engagement Prosecutors in the pilot were expected to attend community meetings, educate the public about the work of the U.S. Attorney's Office and respond to citizens' complaints about safety and crime problems. "They will engage in community activism," Holder said at the press conference announcing the pilot project. "They will identify problems in the community that breed crime, they will bring together the key players who can solve those problems, and they will follow through to make sure that the job is done right and to the satisfaction of the citizens who are affected." To facilitate this ambitious goal, two prosecutors were asked to focus specifically on community engagement. These two didn't prosecute cases; instead, they devoted all their time to meeting with community groups, addressing citizens' safety concerns and fostering police-prosecutor collaborations. These two prosecutors worked out of an office on a rotating basis in the Fifth District's police headquarters.

Geographic Assignment Building on the experience of the Violent Crimes Section, prosecutors were assigned a specific territory. But while prosecutors in the Violent Crimes Section were assigned to an entire police district, prosecutors in the pilot were assigned to only one of the 13 patrol service areas in the Fifth District. The idea was that by giving prosecutors narrower territories to cover, they would cultivate an even greater sense of the community — “its people, its problems, its priorities,” Keenan said — as well as a more in-depth understanding of the area’s criminal patterns and personalities.

Case Selection Prosecutors in the pilot were given the discretion to vertically prosecute *any* case within their patrol service areas. This arrangement eliminated the inter-office communication snafus that Keenan had complained about; for example, if a homicide, attempted homicide and a drug sale were all interrelated, they no longer had to be distributed among three sections within the office. A single prosecutor could work on them all at once.

Vertical Prosecution Prosecutors would keep their cases from arraignment through final disposition. As the office’s experience with vertical prosecution had already demonstrated, this would help them build “more effective cases against offenders,” Keenan said. It would also ensure that prosecutors remained accountable to the community: they couldn’t shift the blame to another prosecutor or section in the office if a case turned out badly. The fact that they would be held personally accountable in this way gave prosecutors a huge incentive to do the best job possible.

The stakes were high for those working on the pilot project. Holder had promised that if the project was a success, “then we will reconfigure the U.S. Attorney’s Office and implement community prosecution citywide.”

Selecting Cases

It was clear from the start that the Washington D.C. experiment was going to place a heavy emphasis on prosecuting criminals. This immediately distinguished it from other community prosecution experiments around the country in which prosecutors focused on non-prosecutorial strategies for fighting crime, such as organizing volunteer neighborhood patrols or working with community groups to clean up local hot spots and eye sores.

When deciding which cases to personally prosecute, the assistant U.S. attorneys in the pilot project used a new measuring stick: what mattered most was not the severity of the offense but the importance of a case to the community. Quality-of-life offenses, for instance, that once might have been dismissed (“no papered” in the office’s parlance) were now receiving extra scrutiny because prosecutors were hearing again and again at community meetings that prostitution, abandoned properties, illegal alcohol sales and other low-level offenses were top community concerns.

Take the case of “Reds,” an alcoholic street person: He had been arrested dozens of times over 18 months for disorderly conduct, public drinking and other lesser

charges. The charges had all been dismissed, but when the local prosecutor learned that the community and the police were upset about Reds' behavior, he decided to take the next arrest as far as he could.

Inevitably Reds got in trouble again; this time he struck someone with a bottle. The prosecutor charged him with assault with a deadly weapon, a felony. Keenan said that others in the office chided the community prosecutor for taking so seriously a case that in the past would have been "no papered." But the fact that Reds' conduct diminished the community's sense of safety made all the difference. The prosecutor pursued the case and, after a series of events that included absconding from a court-ordered alcohol treatment program, Reds was slapped with 10 months in jail.

'Smart Prosecution'

By working within a narrow geographic area and meeting regularly with neighborhood stakeholders, prosecutors cultivated meaningful relationships in the community. They got to know the local players, both good and bad. "I can tell you who is whose brother-in-law, who's really married," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Anne Pings. Armed with this in-depth knowledge, community prosecutors began to make connections between different crimes, track down suspects and witnesses with greater ease and build more air-tight cases. This is at the heart of what Keenan and others in the office like to call "smart prosecution."

"There's an incredible flow of information, which makes it much easier to do my cases," Assistant U.S. Attorney Jennifer Anderson said. "If someone says, 'Boo Boo is out there,' I know who Boo Boo is. If he's the only witness, I might know from personal experience that he's not reliable. And if I need to track him down, I know the residents and the police officers who can help me do it."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Anne Pings, who was assigned to a seven-square-block high-crime neighborhood at the pilot's inception, said residents routinely paged her in the middle of the night to report a shooting, drug sale or other troubling event. "A lot of folks would rather call me than the cops, so I call the police for them. It's a question of trust. They see me at their community meetings, or they've heard about me some other way." When a crime was committed, Pings had a wealth of personal contacts at her fingertips to help her track down leads. After four years assigned to the same district, she knew someone on virtually every street. "It's like being the D.A. in a small town," she said.

Community Problem-Solving

Of course, developing the trust of local stakeholders took time. Willamina Lawson, a community activist in the Fifth District, said that her neighborhood had to be shown that community prosecution was more than just a press release and, in fact, a substantive program that would improve her neighborhood. "We were skeptical at first, but then the prosecutors kept showing up at our meetings, listening to us, really trying to make a difference. They proved themselves through their consistency. To this day, if there is ever a community meeting, Anne Pings is there," Lawson said.

In the end, the pilot project "made a world of difference in our community," Lawson said. "When I first moved into the community eight years ago, it was like I

moved into the devil's bowels... And then when the community prosecutors [came into the neighborhood] it all just abated down to a livable level of life... I come out now and hear birds instead of gunshots. I come out now, I smell air instead of marijuana."

One thing that helped prosecutors foster good will was their willingness to handle neighborhood problems both large and small. "A building inspector and I would get owners of problem properties to come down to their buildings and we'd say, 'You won't get a fine if you take care of this,'" recalled Assistant U.S. Attorney Stephanie Miller, one of the two attorneys who worked out of the Fifth District station house addressing community complaints. Handling these type of nuisance complaints earned Miller the moniker "trash lady" around the office, but also the appreciation of district residents. In another instance, Miller related, "there was a complaint about a barking dog, and the first thing we did was ask the person complaining, 'Can you talk with your neighbor about the dog?' It became sort of an informal mediation, and we were able to solve the problem at the front end."

When community prosecutors haven't been able to solve a problem themselves, they've been able to link citizens with other resources. Regina James, a Fifth District resident, called a community prosecutor after she learned that a night club with a history of drugs and violence was trying to re-open in her neighborhood. Within a day, the U.S. Attorney's Office linked Ms. James with pro-bono counsel, who helped the community successfully argue before the Alcohol and Beverage Commission that the night club owner should not be issued a liquor license. "I was very impressed with the response, how quickly they got me help," James said. "You don't expect a fast response like that from government. They waste no time."

Relationship With Police

Prosecutors and police have also enjoyed a better working relationship as a result of the pilot project. Police Commander Ross Swope, who at the time the pilot project was launched was captain of the Fifth District, said that as a result of community prosecution, police officers and prosecutors have the most cooperative relationship he has ever seen in his 25 years in law enforcement. "Police officers are working with the same U.S. attorneys day after day, case after case, and these relationships build results," Swope said.

Detective Michael Irving, who is assigned to the Violent Crime Unit in the Fifth District, said he routinely updates prosecutors in his district about his investigations — something he never dreamed of doing a few years ago when he knew few prosecutors by name. "Now I work with the same prosecutors day in and day out. You develop a rapport," Irving said.

Irving now has ready access to not only community prosecutors' knowledge of the law, but also their knowledge about the community. For instance, during a recent murder investigation, a witness told him the street name of an alleged perpetrator. When Irving mentioned the name to the prosecutor assigned to the area — Assistant U.S. Attorney Deborah Sines — she recognized it right away; she had, in fact, pursued a different case against him a year earlier. Through this simple communica-

tion, which would probably never would have happened in the days before community prosecution, Irving was able to learn the suspect's true identity within minutes rather than days.

Measuring Success

After three years, the pilot project was declared a success. The feedback from the community, the police and the experience of the community prosecutors themselves was overwhelmingly positive. There were also statistics to suggest that the pilot was having an impact: In 1996, when the pilot was launched, the Fifth District had the second highest rate of serious crimes in the city; by 1999, the Fifth District dropped to fifth place and regularly led the seven police districts in monthly crime reductions.

There were even numbers that seemed to show that the pilot had, in fact, helped prosecutors build better cases. For one thing, the pilot project had a higher conviction rate than comparable units in the office. The pilot's overall conviction rate was 81 percent, while the conviction rate in the Violent Crimes Section was 68 percent and in the Homicide Section was 63 percent. When it came specifically to homicide trials, the pilot project's conviction rate was 90 percent, compared to 73 percent in the Homicide Section. The Fifth District, under the pilot, also had the highest indictment rate among all seven of the city's police districts.

To assess the pilot's impact on community attitudes, Keenan had considered conducting a pre- and post-pilot survey of the neighborhood, but planners ultimately rejected the idea. "We thought a person's contact with the prosecutors' office is generally incident driven, and we were worried that a survey would pick up their feelings about a particular incident that they were involved in rather than their overall satisfaction with our presence in the community," Assistant U.S. Attorney DeMaurice F. Smith said. Instead, the office relied on informal feedback from community members and police. They also placed great emphasis on individual success stories — cases that had been solved; convictions that had been obtained; non-traditional approaches to neighborhood problems that had been invented; and new bonds formed between police and prosecutors. "I think a lot of people hear we rely on anecdotal evidence and they seek to discount community prosecution's impact," Smith said. "But I'm not sure there's anything better than anecdotal evidence."

Going Citywide

It was now time to carry out Holder's promise to take community prosecution city-wide. So his successor, U.S. Attorney Wilma A. Lewis, did just that: In November 1999, she announced the expansion of the program to every police district in the city. "By getting out of our offices and into the community we will be a visible partner in our fight against crime," Lewis said at the time. "We have witnessed the inspirational work of many citizens who for years struggled to keep their neighborhoods together while they wrestled against those who chose disorder over tranquility and fear over peaceful coexistence. Community prosecution gave all of us the chance to work together and we are all the better for it."

Translating the lessons of the pilot project into officewide policy was a huge undertaking. The hardest part for planners was balancing the need for efficiency,

which had long meant relying on traditional case processing to handle the office's large caseload, with the new, more resource-intensive approaches honed during the pilot. For instance, while vertical prosecution worked well in the pilot project, it couldn't be applied universally. "The sheer volume of our caseload precluded vertical prosecution in every instance," said Smith, who oversaw the team that developed the officewide community prosecution program.

Planners also had to negotiate several other challenges as well: a lack of resources that didn't allow them to create new attorney slots; the need to give novice prosecutors broad experience in various units, thus preventing them from developing as much knowledge about any one community as veteran prosecutors did during the three-year pilot project; and resistance from long-time staff who were skeptical about the value of community engagement.

Major Crimes Section

Despite the challenges and resource limitations, planners came up with a large-scale revision of the way the office works. The Community Prosecution Major Crimes Section is at the heart of the expanded initiative. The new section is divided into units that correspond to the city's seven police districts. Within each unit prosecutors are assigned to specific patrol service areas. Like prosecutors in the pilot project, these prosecutors decide which cases to take on themselves, and which to refer to the office's other units. Unlike prosecutors in the pilot, however, these prosecutors cover larger areas (two or three patrol service areas as opposed to one) and tend to focus on major crimes, such as homicides, gang-related acts of violence and significant drug deals.

More minor cases are now handled by the Misdemeanor Section, which was retooled so that about half its prosecutors have geographic assignments, and, when possible, prosecute cases vertically. What that means in practice is that when the day's misdemeanor cases come in from, say, the Fourth District, the prosecutor in the Misdemeanor Section assigned to the district decides which cases have a significant community impact and sets them aside to prosecute himself. The remainder of the cases, for the sake of efficiency, are handled in the traditional way: assigned to a misdemeanor prosecutor on rotation and processed through the system horizontally. The Narcotics and Grand Jury Sections have been similarly re-organized, with most of their staff geographically assigned, and the Civil Division, which once focused exclusively on the needs of federal agencies, now also gets involved with issues of local community concern, such as nuisance properties and crack houses.

While a radical departure from business as usual, this new office architecture is in some respects a step back from the ideal embodied in the pilot project. One of the main advantages of the pilot project was that a single prosecutor had the discretion to prosecute virtually any case — from shoplifting to murder. Now, however, prosecutors in the Community Prosecution Major Crimes Section handle only major crimes like murder and attempted murder, and hand off lesser cases to other units. This means that for each individual "there's a little less knowledge being built up about the community than there was before," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Jeff Ragsdale, supervisor of the Community Prosecution Major Crimes Section in the Fifth District.

“During the pilot we had 15 lawyers literally handling 80 to 90 percent of the cases in the district. That’s an incredible intelligence base. That really relates to ‘smart prosecution.’ ... [But now] when you have eight lawyers prosecuting mainly the most serious crime, it’s harder for them to address community needs.”

**Community
Outreach
Specialists**

In addition to re-organizing existing attorney slots, planners, with funding from the Executive Office of the U.S. Attorney’s Office, were able to create seven new positions: paralegals, or “community outreach specialists,” who work in the seven police district headquarters. Their job is to focus on building relationships with local communities and solving neighborhood problems. Smith said the positions allow the assistant U.S. attorneys to focus more on prosecuting cases without sacrificing the office’s ability to “problem-solve” in more non-traditional ways.

Theresa A. Jackson, the outreach specialist in the Fifth District, regularly relays community concerns back to the police and the U.S. Attorney’s Office, where she harnesses the police and prosecutors’ collective knowledge to address local problems. She sometimes looks into the possibility of civil remedies — fines against the property owner, for example, or, in extreme cases, property forfeiture. For nuisance properties — dilapidated houses that draw trash, rats and squatters — Jackson usually takes her own pictures of the eyesores and brings them to the weekly meeting of the Mayor’s Nuisance Task Force, which consists of officials from health, housing, public works and other agencies. “If I show them through pictures what’s going on, it usually brings fast results,” she said.

Motivating Staff

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to implementing community prosecution officewide has been resistance from prosecutors who think that the program is pre-occupied with “trivial” issues like nuisance properties and chronic petty offenders, and who have little interest in getting to know the community.

Keenan feels that motivating staff is crucial if community prosecution is to continue being successful. “We hope to impress on people through education and supervision and the pep-rally approach that this will be good for everyone,” Keenan said. But the office is relying on more than gentle encouragement. In one of the most far-reaching features of the officewide initiative, all prosecutors — from a new hire prosecuting misdemeanors to a seasoned veteran prosecuting international espionage cases — are now required to attend community meetings or otherwise involve themselves with the D.C. community (like speaking at schools or volunteering with local organizations).

“Whether or not you become involved with the community is included in how we rate your success as a prosecutor,” Smith said. “It can affect raises, promotions, everything... If there are individuals who want to come and work here and don’t want to be involved in the community and don’t want to be sensitive to the concerns of the citizens in accomplishing their work, then we don’t want them.”

The policy is so new that supervisors have not yet assessed whether staff is complying. Prosecutors are being offered time off for the hours spent at community

meetings, but for some there may not be enough hours in the day to fulfill the mandate. “The average assistant works 10 to 14 hours a day,” Ragsdale said. “To ask them to then go out into the community would be a hardship.” Some in the office simply don’t see the point of forcing prosecutors to attend community meetings when their hearts aren’t in the effort. “You can’t force someone to be a community prosecutor. They have to want to do it,” one staff member observed.

For assistant U.S. attorneys who are still doubtful about community prosecution, the office has tried to sweeten the experience by allowing community prosecutors to pursue their cases in either local or federal court; in the past, federal court was off limits to all but the most experienced prosecutors. “It’s a carrot for some people,” Anderson said. And, as an added incentive, the office has also shown that those committed to community prosecution are rewarded. Veterans of the community prosecution pilot project have now become supervisors — among them Kevin Flynn, the chief of the Misdemeanor Section; Jennifer Anderson, deputy chief of the Felony Section; and Kathleen O’Connor, deputy chief of the grand jury section.

Conclusion

There is no one way to do community prosecution, and, in fact, given how new the field is, there’s no single definition of what community prosecution is. This has given jurisdictions around the country the freedom to develop their own approaches. The U.S. Attorney’s Office in the District of Columbia has come up with its own unique version, one that emphasizes what it likes to call “smart prosecution.”

“Smart prosecution” shares some of the features of other community prosecution programs, particularly a neighborhood focus and stronger ties to local police and community stakeholders. But “smart prosecution” is not merely a way to boost the public’s confidence in the U.S. Attorney’s Office, or monitor a community’s safety-related priorities. It is also — and this is what makes it unique — an effort to enhance the prosecutor’s traditional role of solving crimes and trying cases.

The U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Columbia is still honing its approach. It is grappling with ways to motivate staff. The jury is also still out on whether mandating attendance at community meetings is an effective way to engage either staff or stakeholders. And the office, like other jurisdictions around the country, has yet to figure out a way to concretely measure the program’s success.

Nonetheless, prosecutors in Washington D.C. feel certain that they’re on the right track. Armed with greater knowledge of the community, prosecutors have found it easier to solve crimes and build stronger cases. “The real benefit of community prosecution can be seen only by comparing it to the traditional mode where you have this random caseload from all over the city and nothing connects to anything else,” Pings said. “With community prosecution, I know everyone in the neighborhood. When I’m questioning a witness about one case, odds are they know something about this other case I’m working on, too. It’s hard to explain, but community prosecution just makes our work as prosecutors so much easier.”

The Washington D.C. experience seems to speak directly to those who have eyed community prosecution suspiciously as a distraction from a prosecutor's main mission of trying cases.

"Even if you're wedded to the old way, the prosecutor as gun-slinger whose only contact with the community is the case, even if that's all you care about, community prosecution helps you," said Assistant U.S. Attorney DeMaurice F. Smith. "We have better information, can respond more quickly and build better cases. From purely a law-enforcement standpoint, it makes sense."

"We're public servants," Smith said. "If we believe our job is to serve the community, this is the best way to do it."

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