

Tom Carr and then-Chief of the Public and Community Safety Division Robert Hood learned about the community court model, which can often apply problem-solving approach to quality-of-life offenses. In March 2005, through the collaborative efforts of the Seattle Municipal Court, the Seattle City Attorney, and the Associated Counsel for the Accused, the Seattle Community Court opened in the municipal court building to serve the downtown district. “We took those individuals who had no place to go, who had spent many days in jail over the years,” said Judge Bonner, “and we designed our program to address those needs.”

Like most community courts across the U.S., by combining punishment with help, the Seattle Court seeks to address the social needs associated with crime, repair the harm done, and help transform offenders into productive members of the community. The Seattle Court has had over 3,000 clients since its 2005 opening, and in 2007 the court expanded its jurisdiction from downtown to the entire city.

The Seattle Community Court handles only defendants who have committed low-level misdemeanors and do not present a public safety risk. In lieu of paying a fee or spending time in jail, all defendants who opt in to the community court are assessed for social service needs and then must contact each social service link, such as community service opportunities identified during assessment. It is common practice in community courts to use alternatives to detention, such as community service as a sanction—participants in the Seattle Court have completed over 50,000 hours of community service, the equivalent of approximately \$500,000 worth of labor—but Judge Bonner stresses the importance of evolving these programs to also educate people about the effects quality-of-life crime has on the community. “We want to teach as well,” Bonner added, “and they can earn [community service] hours by learning about the impact their offenses have had on the business community. We could send everybody to be street sweepers, but that is not necessarily addressing the needs that they have.” If offenders successfully complete the program, their case can be dismissed, which will later come into play when they are seeking housing and employment. Additionally, the Resource Center, which is on site, helps to further connect clients of the court to information about jobs, housing, counseling, and classes to help them get back on track.

A Capacity to Change

Seattle continues to develop their programs and services to address the needs of offenders as those needs change. “We’ve just developed a theft awareness class and life-skills training, which would constitute community service,” said Judge Bonner, who added that Seattle Community Court also recently launched three stand-alone sites that provide young prostitutes with housing and classes on avoiding sexually transmitted diseases. They can earn community service hours at these sites, as well as get literacy training and counseling.

Seattle Community Court is also currently instituting new protocols that allow for community service alternatives for individuals with disabilities. The court already partners with 25 community service organizations, and coordinators from the Seattle Community Court have recently started to expand options to include other options for individuals not physically

A Mentor Community Court

As Seattle Community Court continues to evolve to more appropriately address the needs of the community, the program is also working to help other jurisdictions interested in starting their own community courts. In 2009, through a competitive, peer-reviewed process, Seattle Community Court was selected, along with South Dallas Community Court and Hartford Community Court, to become a mentor community court. Mentor community courts work with the Center for Court Innovation to provide guidance to jurisdictions across the country interested in creating community courts to help combat neighborhood crime. Seattle has recently provided information to jurisdictions including Spokane, Washington, Kent, Washington, and Las Vegas, Nevada.

“Don’t use the austere budget climate as an excuse not to move forward,” said Holmes, when asked what advice he would give jurisdictions considering starting a community court. “This is ultimately cost-saving and much more effective than the tradition incarceration route. It really just takes political will. Go ahead and make the small step.” Holmes added that establishing data capture systems that show the benefits of the community court model in contrast with the typical incarceration model is a key step to establishing a community court in the long-term.

An Evolving Partnership

For some who work in the court, the problem-solving approach is new. Craig Sims, chief of the Criminal Division, said: “When I came here in January 2010, I didn’t know much about community court. I’ve been a prosecutor since the late nineties, working in the traditional mode of prosecution: Someone does something wrong, they go to court, they get prosecuted, they go to jail, and we move on to the next one. It was quite refreshing for me to collaborate with the court and the defense to figure out a different way to resolve lower level crimes.”

“We’re all partners in this,” added Holmes, and the Seattle community can see the tangible the benefits of this partnership. “We’ve had some wonderful public events,” said Holmes. “Rather than spending time in jail, low-level offenders were out beautifying the community and giving back. Community murals have had unveiling events, heavily attended by local community groups and local media, and the community is able to feel less cynical about the criminal justice system.”

“I like the fact that it’s an opportunity court,” said Sala. “You have an opportunity to make a difference, to change something. As a prosecutor, I would rather see that than the same offenders constantly coming back.”

Waldman added: “That’s the definition of insanity, right?—doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

“Everyone has a story,” Murray said. “Some are more horrific than others. But the bottom line is there’s a thing called choice. Community court gives our clients the choice to be successful.”