

Overview

The Red Hook Community Justice Center works to redefine the relationship between the justice system and communities by addressing local needs, empowering residents, enhancing access to justice, and transforming systems from within.

The Community

Home to Brooklyn's largest and oldest public housing development, Red Hook has long experienced disinvestment and over-reliance on incarceration. It was against this backdrop that the Red Hook Community Justice Center was launched by the Center for Court Innovation as a revolutionary model of court reform—the first multi-jurisdictional community court that takes a holistic, problem-solving approach to working with the community. The Justice Center was planned and designed with extensive input from the community and local stakeholders, ensuring greater access to justice, system accountability, and responsive services that truly address harm and promote healing. Since its inception over two decades ago, the Justice Center has showcased unconventional ways of how a justice institution can shift the locus of power and change from system actors to the community itself.

Key Features

The Justice Center's jurisdiction extends beyond Red Hook, spanning three adjacent police precincts and over 220,000 people. A single judge hears cases from these neighborhoods that ordinarily would go to three different courts: civil, family, and criminal. Whenever possible, cases are resolved through a restorative, problem-solving approach that seeks to repair harm and address the underlying issues that bring individuals into the justice system. The Justice Center also serves as a hub

for an array of innovative programs that seek to strengthen the community and address emerging needs. These programs are available to litigants—as a means of resolving their cases and breaking the cycle of justice-system involvement—and to the community at large. The Justice Center's approach incorporates the following key principles.

Promoting Innovation: By operating at a localized level with dedicated and collaborative partners, the Justice Center functions as a laboratory to test out new and innovative solutions on a smaller scale. When those solutions prove to be effective, they can be replicated or scaled up in other locations or within the broader system. For example, Red Hook piloted the Center's Driver Accountability Program in 2015. After quickly proving successful, the Center subsequently secured funding to expand the program citywide.



Advancing Equity: The Justice Center works to reduce systemic harms and shift power back to the community through its use of community-based alternatives to policing, incarceration, and eviction. Its onsite Housing Resource Center empowers residents with information and self-advocacy tools and provides support navigating the court process. The Resource Center also advocates for public policies that eliminate disparities in treatment between public and private housing residents.

Problem-Solving: By addressing the underlying issues driving individuals into the justice system, the Justice Center seeks to achieve better outcomes for individuals and communities. Onsite clinicians are available to assess and connect individuals in real time to resources and services, which may be used to resolve a case or on a voluntary basis. These services can include drug or mental health treatment, as well as educational and employment-related services. Once engaged, staff monitor and support participants and report back to court on progress where required.

Community Engagement: The Justice Center serves as a resource to local residents through its programs, outreach, and even through its physical space, which is available to community members and local organizations to host meetings and events. Its reach extends far beyond its walls, as staff organize coat drives, community events, clean-up efforts, and activate public space to enhance feelings of safety and cohesion in the community. The Justice Center builds community capacity to respond to conflict

before it reaches the justice system, through programs like Peacemaking and Youth Impact. The Justice Center also fosters collaboration among government, neighborhood groups, and community members.

Healing and Restorative Responses: The Justice Center seeks to restore the harm done to victims and the community. Through our Peacemaking Program, community volunteers are trained in a Native American approach to conflict resolution that brings together people in conflict to seek a consensus resolution. The program takes referrals from the court as well as from the community. The Justice Center also includes an onsite Community Healing and Wellness department, which provides wrap-around services for individuals who have experienced crime or violence in their homes or communities. Clinical staff support individuals as they cope with these issues and guide them along their paths to healing by providing client-centered and trauma-informed advocacy, counseling, and case management services with the goal of empowering participants to achieve stability, safety, and healing in their lives.

Procedural Justice: Research has shown that when defendants and litigants perceive the court process to be fair, they are more likely to comply with court orders and follow the law in the future—regardless of whether they “win” or “lose” their case. This concept, often referred to as procedural justice, lies at the core of the Justice Center’s approach and manifests itself in everything from the courtroom design, to the building signage, and the interactions between staff—including the judge—and court users. By treating every individual with respect and dignity, members of the community are more likely to trust and engage with the system.

Investing in Youth: By engaging local youth, the Justice Center invests in crime prevention and leadership development. It hosts an array of programming that serves youth who are at-risk, justice-system involved, or simply looking to expand their horizons. On-site programs include a transformative mentoring program,



internships, arts-based programming, and Youth Impact, a peer-led diversion and youth leadership program. Through a partnership with the New York City Department of Education, the Justice Center hosts an on-site High School Equivalency program that serves young people who have been disconnected from school or who were not well-served by traditional high school.

Impact

An independent evaluation of the Justice Center by the National Center for State Courts found that the Justice Center's criminal and family court have helped reduce the use of jail, reduced recidivism, and saved taxpayers millions of dollars. The report is available for download at: http://bit.ly/RH_eval. Outcome data also reveal that the Center's unique approach to housing court, providing direct access to justice for Red Hook residents, results in a better process and better outcomes. In 2019, fewer than 1% of Red Hook housing court cases received a default judgment, compared to 14% of cases in the downtown Brooklyn housing court. That same year, 34% of housing court filings in Red Hook were initiated by tenants seeking repairs in their units, compared with just 7% of cases in Brooklyn overall.

Partners

The Justice Center is the product of a unique public-private partnership that has engaged all levels of government: county, city, state, and federal. Partner agencies include the Center for Court Innovation, New York State Office of Court Administration, City of New York, New York City Criminal Justice Agency, New York City Department of Education, New York City Housing Authority, New York City Department of Probation, Kings County District Attorney's Office, Legal Aid Society, Brooklyn Defender Services, and the New York City Police Department.

For More Information

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