

Sharing the Solutions Roundtable

Hearing from the Bench: Judicial Roundtable

Transcript

Panel Members

Hon. Scott K. Ahlf
Olympia Municipal Court Judge
Olympia, Washington

Hon. Linda Cooke
Presiding Judge for the Boulder Municipal Court
Boulder, Colorado

Hon. Marcia P. Hirsch
Presiding Judge of the Queens Drug Treatment Court, the DWI Treatment Court, the Mental Health Court, the Veterans Court, and the Drug Diversion Court
Queens, New York

Hon. Cylenphia LaToye Miller
Judge, Third Judicial Circuit Court
Family Division, Juvenile Section
Detroit, Michigan

Hon. Mary C. Logan
Spokane Municipal Court Judge
Spokane, Washington

Hon. Andra D. Sparks
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Panel Facilitated by Chief Craig Meidl
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Chief Craig Meidl: Welcome to *Sharing the Solutions: Police-Court Partnerships to Address Homelessness*. We're excited to have you join our conversation today of judicial and police leaders from across the country. Here, you will have a chance to learn how police departments can partner with the courts. Before we get started, I'm going to ask the judges if they would please introduce themselves. We will start with Judge Cooke.

Judge Linda Cooke: Hello, I'm Judge Cooke from the Boulder Municipal Court in Boulder, Colorado. I've been a judge in this court for 20 years. Some of the issues that we encounter on a pretty regular basis here are crimes involving people who are [inaudible], young adults who are attending the university, and a variety of other cases.

Meidl: Thank you, Judge. And next, I would like to introduce Judge Ahlf.

Judge Scott K. Ahlf: Thank you. I'm Judge Scott Ahlf with the Olympia Municipal Court. I've been the judge here for the last 16 years. We have a community court we've had for the last five years, and we deal with a lot of the homeless issues that we're dealing with in our local community. We are the state capital of the state of Washington, and we address a lot of different issues with our courts.

Meidl: Thank you, Judge. And next, I would like to introduce Judge Sparks.

Judge Andra Sparks: Hello. My name is Andra Sparks and I'm a presiding judge in the city of Birmingham, Alabama. I've been in that position for about 13 years, and we have a menu of specialty courts here in Birmingham; we've determined that's our best approach to helping our neighbors who find themselves falling within our jurisdiction. One of those specialty courts is our Turning Point Court, which is the court for those individuals experiencing homelessness. As a matter of fact, I'll handle that docket in a few minutes. But we're glad to be here to share what we've learned over the years, well, with the rest of these judges.

Meidl: Thank you, Judge. And next, I would like to introduce Judge Miller.

Judge Cylenthia Miller: Hello everyone. My name is Cylenthia LaToye Miller. I'm one of the judges at the Third Circuit Court in Detroit, Michigan. I'm also formerly with the 36th District Court in Detroit. At the 36th District Court, I had the pleasure of working with a team of folks to found something called Street Outreach Court, Detroit, which was a homeless court program. I continue to work with that program to this day, even though I'm at a different court now. That program has been able to help people return to self-sufficiency who were homeless, and the stats are pretty impressive—and more importantly, the lives changed are incredibly impressive. So I look forward to talking with everyone today, and thank you so much.

Meidl: Thank you, Judge Miller. And, Judge Hirsch, would you please introduce yourself?

Judge Marcia Hirsch: Hello, I'm Judge Marcia Hirsch. I sit in Queens County in New York City. I've been a treatment court judge working in felony parts for the past 15 years. I preside over a drug treatment court, a mental health court, a veterans' court, a DWI treatment court, and a drug diversion court for persons with long criminal histories. In addition to our treatment and mental health court providers, we also work with probation and with the sheriff's office.

Meidl: Thank you, Judge Hirsch. And, Judge Logan, could you please tell us about yourself?

Judge Mary Logan: Thank you. I'm Mary Logan, and I am a municipal court judge in the city of Spokane, which is known as the inland empire. We are the largest city between Seattle and Minneapolis, and we

developed a community court program here to address low-level misdemeanor cases involving people struggling with issues surrounding shelter and food and identification and have developed what I would consider to be an incredible relationship with our police department. I have been a judge since 2009 when the city of Spokane broke off and took control of their own court, standing it up independent of the district court that was here. So I look forward to this discussion. Thank you.

Meidl: Thank you, Judge Logan. Now, I'm Craig Meidl. I'm the chief of police for the Spokane Police Department. I've been with the department now for about 27 years. I've been the chief for about four and a half years as well. So, I first came into contact with community courts through Judge Logan under the prior chief. And I was brought in at the very beginning. It was a very seamless process. It started with a relationship with our judges, and Judge Logan was really the tip of the spear in terms of initiating the community court within our community. For us, it has been groundbreaking for our region. I'm very excited to be with all of you here today to garner wisdom from all the courts from across the country. I think this is just a great opportunity.

Meidl: So real quick, briefly: In Spokane, we really knew that we needed to do something with our homeless population. We knew that we were not going to arrest our way out of the problem—and I don't know that we would want to, even if we could have. Officers were getting tired of getting called to the same location for the same people, with the exact same outcome. And we knew that nothing was going to change unless we were willing to change the strategies and tactics with how we work with our homeless population. My sense is many officers from across the country share these feelings and, at some level, probably many of the courts as well.

Meidl: So our successes here in Spokane would not have been possible at all without partnering with our courts, the prosecutor's office, public defenders, and also our service providers in the theme for this here, WebEx, is collaboration, data, resource sharing, and partnerships. So with that, we'll get to our first question. And speaking of partnerships, each of the courts that is represented here today have a long-established partnership with law enforcement. For the audience, it would be helpful if they were able to hear from you all about the foundation of these partnerships. And if I could, I would like to start with Judge Logan. Judge, could you share from your perspective how your court works with the police department?

Logan: Well, I would say it's foundational, and it was after mulling over the decision about launching something as innovative and, frankly, frightening as a court that isn't even going to be in the courthouse, we knew that we needed to—when I say we, it was with, in partnership with the public defenders because they are the primary attorneys on these cases and the prosecutor's office. We needed the police department to lend comfort to the people that we were really serving, not only our participants, but the downtown where we were going to hold court.

Logan: There were many businesses that were struggling with the issues of people that are struggling with shelter with them, setting up camp in front of business thresholds. It was important that the police department be on board with this. Understanding that it wasn't to let anybody off the hook, it was really

to get to the root cause of this, what we would refer to as a gerbil wheel, right? Arrest, cite, arrest, book, release, and repeat, with nothing that's really changed.

Logan: And so foundationally, I went to the new chief that was hired, and I didn't know what to think. I didn't really know about his background. But, lucky me, because his experience was from White Plains, New York, but they already had a community court going. And his response to me was, "We will do whatever we can to support you in this initiative." So that was where we kicked off, was with that support, right from the get-go. Captain Judi Carl was assigned; she was in the downtown precincts. The police department was just developing a precinct concept. The four of us- myself, the public defender, and the prosecutor, and Judi Carl, frankly—and our probation officer went downtown to pitch what we were anticipating opening up.

Meidl: Judge Logan, I would add, I remember as the assistant chief back then. I was in one of those meetings and one of the things that really, I think, drives home the partnership and collaboration portion is, I remember you came in with all really the quality-of-life crimes that really seemed to cause the most angst for our downtown businesses and visitors. And you actually worked with the department and you said, what are some of the quality-of-life crimes that you all are comfortable referring to community court? So you sought input. You came in and asked for an input as well. I think that just really emphasized that partnership and collaboration. Thank you very much. Judge Ahlf, could you talk about how your court began working with police collaboration and the planning efforts that made your program a success?

Ahlf: Sure. We started off with our police department, just the same way that Spokane. We actually went and visited the Spokane community court and learned processes as were going along. We brought in community members, we brought in our city council, we brought in treatment providers, everybody in the community, but most importantly, we had the law enforcement involved with us, right from the get-go. Because we had the walking patrol, and we've had that all along in the city of Olympia; walking patrol deals with a lot of the nuisance crimes that we have to address in downtown: criminal trespass, the thefts, the loitering, sometimes those issues that were not being addressed.

Ahlf: And really, when we bring them into community court, we're addressing the needs of the individual and not the crime that was charged. But, bringing in the law enforcement involved, they could tell us what the events and what were the crimes that we're really focusing their efforts on to make the difference. And so it really helped to have them involved. It helped to kind of form our court and to work together as that process moved along.

Meidl: Thank you, Judge Ahlf. Judge Miller, what does this partnership look like in your jurisdiction?

Miller: So our partnership at Street Outreach Core Detroit is massive. We have folks from the community with our community-based organizations, including Capuchin Soup kitchen, Southwest Detroit Solutions, Wayne County Neighborhood Legal Services, all kinds of other partners. We have homeless shelters who are partners in the program. Our Wayne County Sheriff's Department, the city of Detroit prosecutor, the county prosecutor, as well as our city of Detroit municipal parking department.

Miller: But the two founding agencies that came together and had the vision for this were Street Democracy, which is a law firm, actually, headed by a fantastic lawyer, Jayesh Patel, and an organization led by people who are homeless or formerly homeless called the Detroit Action Commonwealth. And they had the vision and the idea, but they couldn't get any buy-in from anyone at the court or police or anywhere else. And for me, when I was tapped by my priest, actually, because our soup kitchen was involved, to go to the meeting, I just fell in love with the idea. The idea of being able to help people who were homeless to be able to return to self-sufficiency was incredible to me.

Miller: There's a lot of resistance that we met though at the start of this. And we had literally people who said, I don't care how they come here, they can come in a bag of leaves. They can come to the court. I'm not going to the homeless kitchen to hold court. There was a lot of resistance, but in the end, we won over the day and we won over the hearts and minds of my colleagues and the program has been doing extremely well and it's due to that partnership.

Meidl: That sounds like a great outcome. Thank you, Judge Miller.

Miller: Thank you.

Meidl: COVID-19 changed the landscape for the entire nation, and the judicial processes were absolutely no different. Can you share with us how you ran into some hurdles and you were able to work with some entities on a new transportation for community members that needed to get to certain locations?

Hirsch: Sure. COVID certainly hit New York City very hard back in March and April. And we had to be creative because we were not able to use our usual resources to escort our folks from court or from Riker's Island or city jail to their programs or to supportive housing. So the legal aid social workers were working remotely. Our peers were working from home. So we had to be creative. We were able to use the New York mental hygiene law and partner with our sheriff's office.

Hirsch: So the sheriff's department—I will sign an order, and then the sheriff's department will send a representative to either the courthouse or to Riker's Island. And when the person is released, they will transport and escort the person to either their residential treatment program that they've been connected with or their supportive housing location. It's been seamless, the sheriffs have been wonderful to work with, and our participants really like the personal interaction with the sheriff that they're getting as the sheriff being their Uber driver, whatever, to their program, rather than someone who would be arresting them or cautioning them to follow the law or whatever. So it's improved the relationship and it's been terrific for our court.

Meidl: Another great outcome. Thank you very much. So this project is called *Sharing the Solutions* for good reasons. The partnerships, the collaborations that you all take part in each day are great lessons for all of our audience at so many different levels. Many times these solutions include courts, include police, they include community members, and the outcomes are always much better and more productive because of this team effort. Judge Sparks, I'm anxious to hear from you about your continued growth of not only new partnerships, but you're also strengthening the existing partnerships. Could you talk about

your local team and the consortium that you have in place that coordinate efforts for the most positive outcomes?

Sparks: Well, I'm really enjoying hearing the stories of these other communities. Some of them I was already aware of, but they follow common themes. A group of concerned leaders identify as a problem and then starts to move the pieces on the chessboard they can control to make things happen. And we all get to a place where we realize we don't have enough pieces and we have to go out and talk to other people and ask them to put their pieces on the board. And such was the case with the city of Birmingham, which has always been a very giving community. We determined some years ago that homelessness was an issue that we had to collectively approach.

Sparks: And so, long before I was even on the bench at Birmingham Municipal Court, there was the beginning of an organization called Project Homeless Connect, where a group of individuals came together one day a year and brought all the nonprofits in the community together to offer services in their various capacity. So we'd all come to the municipal auditorium and then droves of homeless people would come in one day. We did that for a few years. The court came in initially, and we would basically clear warrants because that's all the people were concerned about, clearing warrants so that they could come in and get an ID.

Sparks: We found out the magic of getting identification coming from this. Well, after doing that for two or three years, I asked my team if we were utilizing our resources to its best capacity, because we'd see 200 or 300 people in a day. And I told them if we saw 200 or 300 people in a day, that means we should be seeing a number of people each month. And so, we finally turned around, grabbed the leaders of those organizations, which was the Birmingham Bar Association, Volunteer Lawyers Association. We got One Roof, which was a consortium of homeless providers; Birmingham police department; Community Action Partnership, which was an entity formed by the downtown business owners who were self-policing. We brought all of them to the table and we formed what we now call Turning Point Court.

Sparks: We chose initially to meet in a homeless shelter because that's where people were because the cases were funneled to us by the homeless providers. We were like the cherry on top of the cake, after they had gotten in the system, then we remove any legal impediments to them continuing to move forward. Well, we found out that we had technical problems going to the homeless shelter. So we had to move to a municipal building so that we could be on our own system. We moved to the Boutwell Auditorium here in Birmingham, which also doubles as the warming station during inclement weather.

Sparks: Homeless community was used to that. It was not intimidating, even though it's a block and a half from the courthouse. It was easy for them to come to Boutwell [Auditorium], and we've been there until we evolved during COVID to our third iteration of Turning Point Court, which is virtual. So it's been growing, we've been able to utilize these resources. Each step has brought more partners into the process, and I'm excited that we'll continue to help people move from homelessness to being able to help themselves. It's not been without problems, but anything worthwhile was going to have some problems. But, we work them out collectively and I think we'll continue to grow.

Meidl: Absolutely. Thank you, Judge Sparks. The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step, and I'm so excited to hear you doing that in your area. Judge Cooke, the underlying theme for so many of our homeless community is barriers. There's so many different barriers that they have to overcome, and we know that the courts work with their partners in overcoming these barriers. Could you share how your partnership with the police department and the downtown businesses has really helped support your clients?

Cooke: Sure. Our partnership has grown up very organically and maybe a little less intentionally than some of the other folks have spoken about. But in 2014, our police department stood up a homeless outreach team that consists of two officers. We pretty quickly began partnering with them and found ways that we could each leverage our respective roles and work together to serve the homeless. And then in 2016, we were able to repurpose an open probation position into a homeless navigator position, because one of the key things that we found that was a barrier to people making really positive change and taking steps towards housing in particular was the lack of somebody to help them walk through the necessary bureaucracies and complete the necessary forms and all of those things, whether it was to get an ID or a social security card or a birth certificate, or some of those other items, as well as helping them get entree into the housing system.

Cooke: I'm sure as many places do, we have a coordinated system for entry into the path for housing and we administer the vulnerability index also known as the VI-SPDAT here at the court. So the homeless outreach team officers have been really helpful, both in sort of referring people to us. And so, the homeless navigators can engage with them and they oftentimes earn dismissal of their case or very favorable outcomes in their cases because the prosecutors and the defense attorneys are involved in those dispositions.

Cooke: But also, the homeless outreach team is very helpful in transporting people so that they can get to those different agencies so that they can for instance, get their application in or keep their appointment with the Department of Motor Vehicles or whatever it might be. I heard somebody mention an Uber. One of our homeless outreach team officers likes to call it the black and white taxi. The Downtown Business Association has been very helpful because they're also very involved with the homeless outreach team officers.

Cooke: But one of the things that they've been able to put on the table is in addition to voicing their concerns and what their issues are, they've also been able to offer up assistance. So for instance, when one of the people who had over a hundred violations, pretty significantly mentally ill, was housed, they gave the homeless outreach team officers a gift certificate to be used by that individual for whatever purpose he needed in his new apartment. And because the homeless outreach team officers knew that he probably would not refrain from smoking, even though that was required, they bought a very nice air filter to put into his apartment. So there's a lot of collaboration that's happening there to get people from step one, to housing and beyond.

Meidl: That's so great to hear. Absolutely. And Judge Logan, I'll actually say our court has similar experiences with innovative solutions and problem solving with our police partners.

Logan: So, all sorts of people coming into my court, but I have to say that when a priest walked in, that made me pay attention in a little bit different fashion. We have a great connection with our religious folks here. They're amazing service providers for us. But, when the priest walked in, that was just another level of different for me. And the reason was, is that they were attempting some efforts on their own through the Catholic church to assist in providing services to the homeless population.

Logan: But they weren't really able to handle it very well. And unfortunately, it turned into a little bit of a negative so that a lot of the downtown precinct kept having to go down to the church to assist them. And so, Sergeant Harmon turned it around and said, well, what if we do something with the downtown community court? And at that point in time, we were housed in the library. It's going through renovations right now. We hope to return. But, we were at the downtown library and in conversation with the priest, he said, "We could divert the money to help bring sack lunches to you and also to make goody bags."

Logan: And so again, it was just this, how do you create a success out of what could have been something very negative with a situation that was sort of overtaking the church and then using that conduit to where there were the resources available through our community court.

Meidl: Thank you, Judge Logan. It's like Judge Spark said, Spokane's the same, we have so many people that are so giving in this community and to hear that the church was willing to give you resources. It reinforces that it's amazing what we can do if we don't care who gets the credit for it as well. So a great partnership there. Judge Miller, you talked earlier about this Street Democracy, and that's a very unique program that you have in your area. Can you talk about that? And, how can other areas potentially bring something like that to their jurisdiction?

Miller: Well, Street Democracy is a very unique, like I said, law firm. That is the name of a law firm. Street Democracy partnered with the Detroit Action Commonwealth to come up with the idea for Street Outreach Court, Detroit, which is the program that I helped to found at the 36th District Court. Street Democracy is something that cannot necessarily be replicated because it—you're talking about a law firm led by people who are led by their hearts and not by money. Mr. Patel always jokes and says, hey, the only reason I can do this is because my wife takes care of me.

Miller: And, that's kind of where that is. But, Street Outreach Court Detroit, which is the program that was born from the vision of Street Democracy and Detroit Action Commonwealth, can absolutely be replicated. There's a lot of information out there on the web and I certainly would encourage folks to look at it. There's a website, www.streetdemocracy.org/socd, which stands for Street Outreach Court Detroit. I think it's imperative for folks to understand when we talk about success—and I'm sure every judge here could provide stats that are similar or comparable—but in this program, 97 percent of our graduates had stable housing. Six months later, 91 percent had stable employment and 100 percent did not commit a new misdemeanor or felony.

Miller: Three years later, 94 percent of them had not committed a felony or a non-traffic misdemeanor. And 80 percent of them had no open traffic tickets even, and were still stably housed, stably employed, or had stable income. Those are big changes. We're taking somebody who is sleeping under a bridge or

in a shelter in their car, or a couch surfing, mama's house tonight, auntie's house the next night, girlfriend's house the next night, blah, blah, blah, to self-sufficiency, to a tax paying, working, contributing law abiding citizen.

Miller: And that's a tangible, real difference. In terms of the kinds of cost savings that we estimated just in the first three years of this program, which began in 2012, we estimated that it saved the judicial system over \$70,000, and the total operational savings were estimated at \$1.4 million. Because of what was described earlier, you're talking about the gerbil wheel. Somebody's just going to get the ticket, they're coming back, you tell them, oh, you served this many days, pay this fine. They can't pay the fine, they don't have any money. But, if we help them to return to self-sufficiency, they're going to be far more driven to stay on that course. And that's been our experience in Detroit.

Miller: I definitely think it's important to point out that with Street Democracy, the thing that's crucial with them is that they went out and they took the data that they had from their various programs along with ours, because we didn't have three to eight years of data at first, and they were able to secure a grant. That's one of the values of having community partners, because they may have that track record that they can put on the table to go get grant funds and things of that nature that your program can't.

Miller: But, when Street Democracy did that, they were able to bring in another lawyer who worked full time for them in their office to serve this program exclusively, and that was huge. Patty was a huge benefit to us because she was just brilliant and her heart was in it. And now, she's a federal magistrate. So, never know what can happen when you do some good things and the blessings will flow.

Meidl: Absolutely. Thank you so much for sharing that, those are amazing results. And that's what we all want is, to help get these people back on your feet and in a better position, so thank you very much for sharing with us. So you mentioned data as well. Large part of these partnerships is information and data sharing. By sharing information, we're able to help prioritize high utilizers and pool resources and provide more effective responses. So Judge Sparks, can you share how you developed the Top 25 list?

Sparks: Yeah, I wish I could say that the original idea was mine, but I actually copied right from another jurisdiction, which is what I suggest everybody would do. If you really look at the issue of homelessness, I think at its core, it's a communication and a budgetary problem within our community. We have resources available to us that we utilize, that we don't steer toward the issue of homelessness. All governments do this. What we don't realize, I think, and without having the communication, is that every entity in the community is spending budgetary dollars on homelessness. We're simply not talking about it.

Sparks: But when you sit down at the table and you realize that you have one individual who keeps going to the emergency room, who's being transported in Birmingham, it's our fire department, who's utilizing the same providers for shelter care when they're not in jail, who's going to jail, you start adding up all the dollars spent on that individual and then you realize how much we're wasting by not just sitting down and identifying that issue.

Sparks: So we decided to go into the jail and identify the top 25 people who were coming in the jail. And we discovered that was one guy who had basically in a municipal jail, served about two years of his life, about five or six days at a time. It's ridiculous. I blamed us for that, the court, because we have to be smart enough to realize that that's a waste of resources and we are not really helping that person. Some jurisdictions don't think it's their job to help people like that. And you got a mix of people on this call right now who think differently, who think that it's our job to utilize the resources available to us, to help move people from beyond their current situation to a better situation, if we can.

Sparks: And so we got everybody together, we pulled a coalition together and we asked them, what can we now do to start triaging these individuals when they come in at the point of contact so that we don't keep spending all this money on them? We had probably spent on that one individual, we had probably spent a quarter of a million dollars dealing with his issues when it came to hospital stays, because they're going to continue going to the emergency room for their primary care, because they don't have—anytime something's hurting them, they're going to the emergency room, which you and I both know is not the way that people should get their primary care. It's just a matter of sitting down and having a frank conversation about it.

Sparks: But, the question is, whose job is that? For somebody who's voiceless, whose job is it? I've determined that if they come into contact with my agency, we are going to initiate that conversation. I wonder what happens if other organizations have the same idea that when they make contact with their agency or organization, they're going to initiate that conversation and you start bringing everyone to the table.

Sparks: There's one other aspect to it. And that is, when it comes to nonprofit dollars in the homeless community, I do not think those dollars, our dollars, ought to be dispersed on a competitive basis. It just creates too much of a problem. The government has got to step in and realize that it needs all of those willing to help at the table. But, when you put the dollars out, only competitively, then to me, the biggest one in the room is always going to grab all the money. And you have some small nonprofits who do a great job. They can just never get the funding they need because they don't have the administrative setup, they don't have the personnel. I think a better conversation in many communities would help the homelessness problem. But that's our Top 25 list.

Meidl: Thank you. Judge Sparks. Judge Sparks, you mentioned you work with a coalition. What kind of partners are important to have at the table when you're developing this type of coalition?

Sparks: Well, certainly you're going to have your primary governmental organization, the court, police. I think maybe in some instances, the fire department is involved in it as well, depending on how they run to emergencies. You're also going to have your department of human resources, because you're going to need social workers who are helping. You're going to need the nonprofits, who can help with housing, primarily. I think you're also going to need recovery services, organizations, for example, job training, mental health support. Those organizations that can come in and support that way.

Sparks: Because, those are not core governmental duties. And you need partners to do those things in order to help folks. We found out that we've been trying to help people without really talking to people,

trying to identify what they really need. We placed them. I'll call for a social worker to come. I have eight social workers on staff, and we'll call social workers to the courtroom. We'll get a young man placed in—one particular comes to mind, we place him in housing. He has his own apartment. He stayed in the apartment one night before he left. Now, he's got a drug problem too and he's got some mental health issues.

Sparks: But he stayed in the apartment one night. When they finally got him about a month later, because he went on a bender and ended up in the emergency room, I asked him what happened? Said, "Man, we jumped over all the hoops to get you an apartment. It was a nice apartment. What happened?" He simply said, "I was by myself." He said, "I was by myself." He said, "I don't like being by myself." And so even though he had an apartment—by nature, he's gregarious. And so if we had simply talked more, we would've realized that a group setting would've been better for him and would've helped maintain his ability to take care of himself. But it's because we don't talk to people.

Meidl: Very powerful.

Miller: May I contribute something on that point, Chief?

Meidl: Yes, please.

Miller: I just want to say that last point that Judge Sparks has said is vital and crucial, because one of the places we started in Detroit was with Detroit Action Commonwealth surveying its members of currently and formerly homeless folks. And that's how we ended up having the Detroit Municipal Parking Department at the table. Because when we spoke with them, what did they identify as the number one impediment to self-sufficiency? Parking tickets. We thought it was going to be the traffic tickets and warrants. It wasn't.

Miller: The number one was parking tickets. And once we started thinking about it and talking to them, we realized a lot of people are sleeping in their cars. They're getting parking tickets. These tickets keep mounting, mounting, mounting, mounting, and then they become insurmountable. And then, the number two issue was the traffic tickets at the 36th District Court. So that's why we had to put the parking department at the table with us to be able to say, hey, we can resolve these cases at the traffic court, but we can also help you resolve the cases over at the municipal parking department.

Miller: Talking to people is crucial. And one other example of that is that when we think we know what folks need, like Judge Sparks just said, and when we surveyed our folks, one of the things that they talked about was, we need a map. We don't know how to get around. The jobs are out in the other areas. We don't know what routes to catch if we even have the bus money. We don't even know how to get there. We need an alarm clock, right? We don't have phones that have an alarm, but we just need some basic kinds of things.

Meidl: That is so powerful. Thank you, Judge Miller, for sharing that. So I think we're all just so used to, because of our positions, telling people what we're going to do for them, but to be effective, we really need to ask them, what do you need from us to be successful? Thank you both very much for sharing.

Judge Logan, we have something similar here in Spokane with high utilizers. How would you recommend going about developing a high utilizer list to provide most effective response for those folks?

Logan: Thank you. Yeah, it really sprang out of COVID that it became that we focused on the top 20, but it had always been a component of the work that we were doing with the police department, because there were those that would come in that didn't express as many needs. Again, a segue, not trying to hijack, but the Center for Court Innovation gave us a tool so that we could start that conversation. It was a little bit more formal than just saying, what do you need? And it would give us an analysis of how we could guide the individual to the resources that would best meet what their needs were.

Logan: So some of them were high risk and low need. And many of them, most of them, were high need and low risk, and so we could get them in and out. But there was a group that would get wrapped around the axle of the police department all the time. So we asked them, we asked our partners in the police, who are you having to wrangle with all the time? Likewise, with the fire department, who's again, calling 911, "I'm cold on the sidewalk and I don't have my medication." And that would be the call that would then result in, as Judge Sparks had mentioned, I think, frankly, hundreds of thousands of dollars that were being used.

Logan: And so with COVID, we really needed to try to focus because we're partnering with outside entities also for where we hold court, because I don't hold community court in the regular courthouse. As I mentioned, it wasn't the library, so the substitute for the library has been the city hall. So we had to figure out a way to continue to serve the population that so greatly needed to be served, but to a lesser extent.

Meidl: Thank you, Judge Logan. I've been able to witness that process. And it's not a check-the-box, sterile process. You all actually engage in conversations because you know these people, you're familiar with them, and to seeing you dive down into the minutia with each individual really does help provide that level of service that they need. And it's just remarkable to see that occur.

Meidl: So having partnerships with local law enforcement, that provides benefits at multiple levels. For examples, officers are the eyes and ears for the judges that are in the courtroom, and officers are able to share with the judge what's happening out on the street with the courts, as well as help connect those who are on the street with those services. So Judge Ahlf, we don't expect that one and maybe not even most people initially to get everything worked out perfectly the first time. What does accountability look like? And then, how do officers help with that accountability piece?

Ahlf: Sure. And accountability is kind of a fluid term. We used to think accountability is, somebody's going to go to jail. We would have the revolving door. So someone would come into the court, they would have their theft charge. They come in, they get sentenced, they have 10, 20 days that they serve. They go back out the next day, we see them back in court the next week. It's just that revolving door. The accountability is sure, we're getting our pound of flesh, but we're not getting anybody making any changes.

Ahlf: And so when we deal with the community court and the therapeutic courts, and the risk-needs assessment that Judge Logan was talking about, it's amazing. We used to talk about risk assessments and so we would see what the risk was for this individual. But, to really have that risk-needs assessment is to allow them to see what their needs are.

Ahlf: So when people come into our community court, the first thing I say to them is that I don't really care what the charges that got you here, what I care about is what your needs are and what we're going to figure out what you need to do, what we can do for you to get you to where you want to be. And so it's really talking to them and figuring that out. And so we've found that with that approach, working with folks, that our graduates and, as Judge Miller was saying, the recidivism rate is significantly changed. And so we're seeing roughly about 40 to 50 percent of people will recidivate in a normal court setting. We're seeing our community court, that recidivism rate is about 15 percent for our graduates. And so that's a huge difference.

Ahlf: And so that means that accountability is working. That means that we are making changes that are happening. Law enforcement involved with that is that, we've had Sergeant Amy King, who's now Lieutenant Amy King, has been working with individuals. She brings some people that she thinks that are necessary and need the help from our court and she makes suggestions. We have law enforcement at all of our staffing meetings. We also have the walking patrol. So we'll have a court date and someone won't show up. We're more concerned about what's going on with them and what their safety is. And the walking patrol will go out and find them and talk to them and see what's going on. And then tell them, you missed court last week, let's make sure you get there next week.

Ahlf: It's a lot different. It's really that community. I've had a number of people that have been in court and we have a graduation, the officers will all be there. The officers will come and attend the graduation for the community court. Officers will also be involved. It's that two-way street with the officers. We work with them. They're on the street, we don't necessarily know who's going to need the help, but they do. They see them all the time.

Ahlf: And so it works out so well. I've had a lot of officers say, wow, this is really different. We're really seeing some changes in people that we didn't think could change. And so it's a great experience for us and to have them involved and just work that collaborative effort is just amazing.

Meidl: Absolutely. Thank you very much for sharing that, Judge Ahlf. I appreciate that. Judge Hirsch, your court is known to have an open-door policy for past clients and current clients as well. Can you talk a bit about that and how your partners in police and probation help reengage with the current and former clients?

Hirsch: Sure. First of all, we have dedicated probation officers that are assigned to our court. Sometimes people are on interim probation while they're in our part. And sometimes they get sentenced to probation afterwards. Well, our probation officers are trained with our team. Any type of training we do, we include our probation officers, and that's been invaluable because our probation officers really get to know the people that they're supervising. And if people are struggling, if they relapse, if they need to be reconnected with substance abuse services, probation will make that recommendation. And rather than

looking to sentence people who may come back on a violation of probation, they're very happy to work with our court to reconnect the person with services, to have them see their therapist again, get placed on medication if that's required, and to monitor them in my court, as opposed to just asking that they be re-sentenced.

Hirsch: So we're willing to work. There's no such thing as a three-strike rule in my court. People may get a fifth strike or a sixth strike. And the other important piece that I wanted to mention that hasn't been mentioned are what a valuable group our court officers in our building have been with our participants. With our current folks, our court officers can notify us immediately if they thought that someone hasn't been on their medication, or if a young woman came into court with an abusive partner, they could really handle that situation immediately and resolve it and let us know what was going on so that we could be sure our participants were safe when they were coming to court.

Hirsch: So it's been a tremendous collaboration and we couldn't do it without our court officers, our probation officers, and then the police department. I've actually gone and spoke at Police Plaza in New York City to various groups of police officers about our problem-solving courts and what we do, and the reception there has been tremendous as well.

Meidl: That is great to hear. Thank you very much, Judge Hirsch. Judge Cooke, you have police partners there in Boulder, and they've really helped with your homeless situation as well and done some innovative things. Can you share with us about that relationship with Boulder PD and how that works?

Cooke: Sure. And I want to, first of all, mention, because you were talking about high utilizers a few minutes ago, our police officers are very involved in helping us identify and work with high utilizers. I just want to emphasize the importance of bringing police into that conversation, because what we've learned from them is that oftentimes they are not charging people that actually are high utilizers, because for instance, they're tremendously mentally ill and they understand that putting that person in jail may actually be counterproductive. So again, trying to identify those high utilizers should not be based just on trips to the jail or citations in court.

Cooke: In terms of our relationship with our homeless outreach team officers, they are pretty seamlessly embedded with our homeless navigators. Sometimes their roles, it's really difficult to tell them apart. Our homeless outreach team officers, which I think is very helpful to the cause, are not writing citations at all. So that really helps them to develop those relationships and build the trust among folks in the community that are unhoused. And then, when we get together in case or do some planning around particular individuals, the homeless outreach team officers and the homeless navigators are usually doing that work together in concert. Sometimes with the folks from other outside agencies as appropriate, but so that we don't duplicate efforts and figure out who's going to do what, we have them work together to decide how that's going to work.

Meidl: That's great. Thank you, Judge Cooke. You shared that earlier as well about relationships and that is just such a central tenet to any successful program, is having those relationships. So thank you for sharing that. Judge Cooke, we have listeners out there that are in law enforcement, also in the judicial

branch as well, what would be your recommendations if they wanted to start a program like this in their area?

Cooke: Well, on the police side, I would say, talk with your commanding officers, of course. But if you have ideas about how that might be able to work, bring those, bring those to the prosecutor, bring those to the courts. There's lots of literature out there that you can use as a foundation for bringing those ideas forward. So definitely bring those forward. Similarly, on the judicial side where there's, again, many resources, the Center for Court Innovation is one of them. All of us, I'm sure, would be happy to be resources for people. But for us, it was largely becoming aware of what was for me in courts around the country, that looked a lot like mine, reaching out to those folks, understanding what the possibilities were.

Cooke: And very importantly, we visited a lot of community courts when we had our technical assistance grant, before we applied for the community court grant. It's really important to visit other community courts, but also to understand that every community is unique and what looks like community court in one community is not necessarily going to be the same. So while I have very similar dynamics to what Judge Logan and Judge Ahlf have described, we also have some significant differences and we've had to account for those in standing up our community court.

Meidl: Thank you, Judge Cooke. Judge Ahlf, what would you tell either police department or courts that want to start this system in their neighborhood?

Ahlf: You just need to make sure that you go in with that. The idea is that you don't know what you don't know. Because when you get there, you're going to have to be able to listen. As they say, that gave you two ears and one mouth. So, listen to what other folks have to say. Listen and be ready to keep your ideas, but be willing to change, be willing to take the ideas that others have. Both Judge Logan and I have mentored community courts and so we deal with a lot of different courts that come and visit us quite often. And what I always tell them is that what works in Olympia may not work for you, but it's really, get together with your stakeholders, get together with your law enforcement if you're a court. Law enforcement, to make sure if your court is thinking about starting a therapeutic court or community court that you're involved at the ground level, because you really need to have that input.

Ahlf: We need to be able to take all the ideas. We consistently change what we're doing based on the information that we receive. And so you got to be able to change, you got to be able to adapt. And so really that collaborative effort and giving everybody their proper due and then really listening and going forward with them.

Meidl: Thank you very much, Judge Ahlf. Yes, flexibility is so key to make this program a success. Judge Sparks, you have a lot of experience and you've worked with a lot of partners, what recommendations would you give for a community that wants to start a program like this?

Sparks: Well, I'd like to echo a couple of things that Judge Cooke said, and I've heard, or some tones that I thought I heard, and that is that, your community court or your partnership doesn't have to look like anyone else's. It simply needs to reflect what you need in your court. I'll take some things from Detroit,

I'll take some things from the folks in Colorado that might work, but all of those things may not work for us here in Birmingham, Alabama. And so I also think it's important sometimes to bring someone else into the room, to try to explain what you haven't been able to explain. And that's how we can utilize these other judges and staff from the Center for Court Innovation as tellers of a good story, I believe is what I want to say.

Sparks: We know this works. No one has to come in and convince us and tell us that this process we're using works. The difficulty we have is getting other people who are not exposed to what we see all the time to also believe that. And sometimes we can say it until we're literally blue in the face, but it's not until they hear it from someone else they respect. So I think in addition to bringing some judges in, we also need to bring some other police officials. Maybe bring you in and talk to our—police like to talk to police. That might help us out. And maybe I need to stop trying to convince some police officers or the chief or the deputy chief.

Sparks: Although in Birmingham, our police leadership is certainly on board with these type of activities. Getting it across the entire enterprise becomes difficult sometimes, but we are in a good space here. But, for those who want to have these opportunities, talk to people who can come in and tell the story.

Meidl: Excellent. Thank you, Judge Sparks, having that buy-in at the leadership level is so crucial. Judge Logan, you are the reason we have community court in Spokane. Yours probably went really smoothly, because you were a very good salesperson and it made sense and we were ready for it. But what advice would you give for police departments or courts that want to start something similar?

Logan: I think the key to this is always emphasizing that community courts are community based. So listening to the community. I think the police are in that sort of unique position because everybody looks to the police department to solve the problems that arise in the community with law enforcement. Their key job, right? Your key job. But it is learning that and enforcing that law that, instead of the next logical step being just jail imprisonment, lock them up—as you say, we cannot arrest our way out of this problem—is being open to diverting in a way that is really community policing. So it's having that conversation, but always remembering the highlight of this is community. It doesn't happen unless we're having that conversation.

Meidl: Yeah. Thank you, Judge Logan. Judge Miller, you're probably like a lot of communities, you don't have extra money that's a hole in your pocket and you have both spectrums. You have those who want the book thrown at these people and those who feel like, don't criminalize the homeless. So, based on your experience, how would you start something like community court in your area? Or not in your area, but how would you start community court if you wanted to start from the ground up?

Miller: Well, we actually, at the 36th District Court, we do have a community court program and it was built very similarly to how we built Street Outreach Court Detroit, bringing all of the relevant partners to the table and making certain that we were being able to have a champion. I actually wrote three points that I wanted to make on this question that you're asking us. The first is, you got to have a champion or champions. You got to have a Judge Logan, a Judge Sparks, a chief. You got to have somebody that's going to get out front, has the connections, can bring those people to the table.

Miller: The Street Outreach Court Detroit was—Street Democracy, rather—and Detroit Action Commonwealth were struggling. They couldn't get anybody at the court to listen. But, when I called as Judge Miller, they're going to come. It doesn't have to be a judge as was mentioned earlier, but it needs to be some champion that has the political will and the strength and the character to get out here and hustle to bring the people to the table.

Miller: The second thing is, I definitely would refer people if you're thinking about starting a street court or a homeless court or any type of specialty court program, community court, the ABA [American Bar Association] Commission on Homelessness and Poverty has tremendous resources out here to assist you with getting started. I definitely encourage you to get on [their website](#) and look at some of the toolkits and other resources that they have. They have a great toolkit to help with homeless courts.

Miller: And then finally, I want to point out to the police personnel who'll be watching this, help us to help you. That's the bottom line. You want to stop the gerbil wheel from running around, you want to stop picking up the same person over and over again, you want to stop having the businesses call screaming and hollering to the chief about, get these folks and those people from in front of our doors, help us to reduce the number, help us to help those folks get to self-sufficiency because it can happen.

Miller: These programs are all living proof that it can happen. So those would be the big things. Champions, used existing resources, and definitely allow us to help you to help the community.

Meidl: Thank you, Judge Miller, great points. Judge Hirsch, I want to start one of these in my community. I have no idea where to start. What would be your recommendations?

Hirsch: We actually did that when we opened our mental health court. We started stakeholder meetings and we still have them 15 years later. Every three months, we gather our stakeholders together around a big table, and we've invited law enforcement, we've invited local EMTs, we've invited the faith-based community. I'm also a really big local newspaper reader. And if I find a new program that's opening in my area, they're going to get an invitation to the next stakeholder meeting and they're going to be part of our group.

Hirsch: So the number of people around our table have grown exponentially in the past 15 years, but it all comes from community mapping and finding out what your needs are, what your resources are and matching them to see how you can best serve your participants.

Meidl: Thank you, Judge Hirsch, very much appreciate that input. I'll tell you from the police chief's perspective, police officers want to serve the community. The overwhelming majority of them, they really do want to serve and protect the community, but they don't all want to necessarily do it in the same way. I imagine judges are similar, in terms of some judges have a heart for veterans' court, some for DUI court, some for those who are going through addiction issues. Police officers, again, different hearts for different parts of the community.

Meidl: From a chief's perspective, if you're interested in starting a program like this, just because the first judge you approach isn't necessarily interested, don't give up, keep talking to the judges, the programs,

and the data will sell themselves. And keep trying until you can find a judge that has a heart for this kind of program. For the police chiefs, maybe an anomaly, it's an easy sell.

Meidl: Einstein said, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Same thing as we're dealing with our homeless community, we have to change strategies and tactics. We have to be flexible and we have to have those relationships as well. So those relationships require that collaboration as well.

Meidl: So with that, this concludes our talk today. I want to thank each of the judges very much for taking time out of your very busy day and giving us some of your wisdom and experience and thank you for taking the time to learn how you can become a part of the solution as well.