

## Straight out of Red Hook: A community justice centre grows in Liverpool

by Adam Mansky

Over the last two years a small but innovative court experiment called the Red Hook Community Justice Center, located in a low-income neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, has attracted the attention of the British Government. Officials ranging from the Home Secretary and members of Parliament to the Lord Chief Justice and the Attorney General, have all traveled to New York City to see the concept of community justice in action. These leaders, and other high-profile officials, including Prime Minister Tony Blair's wife Cherie Booth, have featured these courts in presentations, conferences, and speeches about the future course of British criminal justice. The culmination of this interest: In July 2003, the British Government announced that it will pilot community justice "centres" of its own, starting with one in the English city of Liverpool.

How and why did Red Hook, Brooklyn, a neighborhood with a reputation for drugs, crime, and disorder, become the most sought-after travel destination for British officials? Here's the story:

### British legal system

When you think of the English legal system, what images are evoked? Well, of course, there's tradition. After all, it is the antecedent for the American system—it's a system where lawyers are still divided into barristers and solicitors, and judges and lawyers still wear wigs in the

courtroom. Then there's intellectual distinction. The decisions of the great British jurists like Lord Coke are still cited as precedent in American courts today. And all of this adds up to heavy-duty *gravitas*. In America, you might even find an English legal society in your local bar association, comprised of U.S. lawyers eager to dissect the latest developments in English law. In short, in the U.S. the English legal system tends to be held in extremely high esteem.

But there is a flip side to this grand history and reputation. Where jurists see independence, neutrality, and disinterest, many ordinary British citizens perceive aloofness and a lack of concern for the real issues confronting real people. As currently constructed, the British courts often find it difficult to resolve minor criminal cases in a way that addresses both the public safety concerns of communities and the problems—addiction, mental illness, lack of job skills—presented by low-level offenders.

Do these problems sound familiar? As our court systems resemble each other, so too do our problems, particularly the crisis in confidence expressed by many citizens. These are some of the same charges that have been levied against state courts in the United States. And these are some of the same problems that led the New York State court system, under the guidance of Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye, to create the community court concept 10 years ago.

### Red Hook

In order to understand why the British Government is interested in creating its own community justice centres, it is important first to understand the concept. Launched in June 2000, the Red Hook Community Justice Center is the nation's first multi-jurisdictional community court. Operating out of a refurbished Catholic school in the heart of an isolated Brooklyn neighborhood dominated by public housing, the Justice Center seeks to solve neighborhood problems like drugs, crime, domestic violence, and housing disputes.

At Red Hook, Judge Alex Calabrese hears neighborhood cases that under ordinary circumstances in New York would go to three different courts (civil, family and criminal). The goal is to offer a coordinated, rather than piecemeal, approach to people's problems. Judge Calabrese has an array of sanctions and services at his disposal, including community restitution projects, on-site job training, drug treatment, and mental health counseling, which are all rigorously monitored to ensure accountability and drive home notions of individual responsibility.

But Red Hook goes far beyond what happens in the courtroom. The courthouse is the hub for an array of unconventional programs that engage local residents in "doing justice." These include mediation, community service projects that put local volunteers to work repairing conditions of disorder, and a youth court where teenagers resolve actual cases involving their peers. The idea here is to engage the community in aggressive crime prevention by solving local problems before they even

come to court.

As the British Government officials who have passed through its doors have witnessed, Red Hook has several key principles.

**Problem-solving justice.** Unlike many conventional courts, which target efficiency as their ultimate goal, the Justice Center focuses on improving outcomes. This type of “problem-solving court” seeks to address the problems that bring defendants to

What I saw at Red Hook was about engaging the community in finding a way of resolving problems, dealing with the consequences, engaging the individual in changing their chaotic lifestyle; it was about the prosecution wanting to get a satisfactory solution, and the defence wanting to make sure their client lived a decent and different life in the future when they knew they were guilty. It was about the community coming together physically as well as intellectually and practically, to help do something about it and using volunteers.

**Addressing disorder.** While much of Red Hook’s energies are spent attempting to solve the problems of individual defendants, the project’s ultimate goal is to improve public safety in a crime-plagued community. By addressing conditions of local disorder like graffiti and broken windows (through supervised offender work crews and other community service projects), the Community Justice Center seeks to create a neighborhood climate that deters more serious offending. In Lord Chief Justice Harry Woolf’s words, Red Hook,

deals with the sort of crimes that individually are not grave, but collectively can blight a locality. . . . I learnt many things from the day I spent at Red Hook. One of the most important, was that we might be making a mistake in [Britain] by not appreciating

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**The Red Hook Community Justice Center (left).**

**Below, Red Hook Public Safety Corps community volunteers paint over a wall of graffiti.**



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court in the first place; it achieves this end by providing the judge with a wide range of sentencing options that can be tailored to individual defendants. Viewed through this lens, a Community Justice Center is a gateway that links people to needed services (such as drug treatment, job training, and adult education) and leverages the authority of the judge to make sure that defendants comply. According to British Home Secretary David Blunkett who is responsible for criminal justice policy for England and Wales:



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## | Focus

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that the courts, and all those involved with dealing with less grave crimes, should primarily be focused on solving the problems of the community in which the crime took place.


**Community justice.** A Community Justice Center expressly acknowledges that a community and its residents are key stakeholders in the justice system. In Britain, crime may be declining, but fear of crime is not. Red Hook is dedicated to the notion that citizens should understand that the court system exists to serve their needs. A central goal, therefore, is to engage the community in shaping the program of the Community Justice Center. Local residents play a variety of roles in Red Hook, from participating in the court process itself through community-impact panels that bring low-level offenders face-to-face with residents for facilitated conversation about the impacts of chronic quality-of-life crime, to setting priorities via a community

advisory board, to providing service through a community volunteer program or a youth court where local teens serve as judge and jury. Taken together, these opportunities offer community residents a chance to see a positive side of justice.

**Accountability.** At the heart of the Community Justice Center concept is the idea of enhanced accountability. First and foremost, the offender is held accountable to the community for his or her offense. By mandating offenders to restore the neighborhood, the Justice Center makes jus-

tice more visible to local residents and acknowledges that communities can be victims just like individuals. Restitution projects include painting over graffiti, sweeping the streets, and cleaning the Justice Center.

Equally important, offenders are accountable to the judge, who takes an active role in compliance monitoring. Judge Calabrese rigorously monitors compliance with social service and community service sanctions by requiring litigants to return to court to report on progress and to submit drug tests. State-of-the-art

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technology helps facilitate this process by ensuring that every missed appointment or failed drug test receives some sort of immediate response. Offenders need to learn up front that there will be consequences to their actions.

But there are other elements of accountability throughout the Community Justice Center concept as well. The judge, prosecutor, and police are also accountable to community residents and to each other. Judge Calabrese attends numerous community meetings and events to send a message that the justice system is not a faceless bureaucracy and will respond to community problems. Based on the Red Hook model, British Attorney General Lord Goldsmith has expressed the hope that England's pilot Justice Centres would, "help to strengthen confidence in the criminal justice system and show that it is there to serve and to respond to the needs of everyone in the community."

### Community justice in England

In July 2003, the British Government convened a national conference dedicated to the idea of community justice, which included speeches by the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, the Lord Chief Justice, the Attorney General—and Red Hook's judge, Alex Calabrese. At the conference, the government announced that it would develop its own pilot community justice centres.

The first step is a community needs assessment. As Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs Lord Charles Falconer has said, "The first pilot in Liverpool will help shape the future development of Community Justice Centres and we will need the help of local people to make sure that we get it right." Over the last several months, planners have begun to meet with Liverpool residents to identify local problems and needs. The exciting news to date is that residents, local leaders, criminal justice agencies, and social service providers have all expressed enthusiasm for the community justice centre concept.

It is anticipated that the Liverpool

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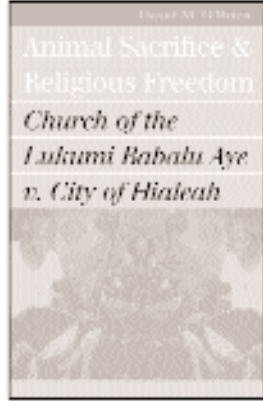
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Community Justice Centre will begin operations in 2004. This project will be an ambitious effort to connect a community to justice in a meaningful, hands-on way. From the beginning of operations, the British Government will be looking closely at this experiment to see whether lessons can be extracted and institutionalized throughout their country. In the words of Home Secretary Blunkett:

We are looking at a new beginning; looking at asking questions about what the system is for; seeking together to ensure that justice is gained, and looking to do that by examining where truth lies and how the whole culture of the [criminal justice system] can change.

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