

TAKING ACTION

A SERIES ON
JUSTICE
INNOVATION

SPOKANE'S LIBRARY COMMUNITY COURT MODEL

For years, courts around the country have faced the challenge of responding to lower-level offenses driven by homelessness, mental health and substance use disorders, and other social problems, with few resources and sentencing alternatives to address the underlying issues that bring people into contact with the justice system.

Community courts seek to tackle these issues at the local level. Community courts are neighborhood-focused programs that combine community resources with justice-system solutions to address local problems. Most community courts handle lower-level nonviolent offenses, but some also address civil, environmental, juvenile, felony, and re-entry matters. These courts enhance public safety by addressing underlying issues that can lead to criminal behavior. By engaging communities in planning and operational processes, they provide justice system officials with more effective options in dealing with lower-level offenses, enhance public trust in the conduct of justice, and help reduce unnecessary incarceration.

The first community court was opened in 1993 in Midtown Manhattan. Since then, community courts have been implemented in a variety of settings, from stand-alone buildings to decentralized courthouses to community centers. Each of these options has reflected an attempt by planners to answer a crucial question: in what setting can the justice system best serve the community with meaningful sentencing options and connections to services?

In 2010, stakeholders from the City of Spokane, Washington, began a planning process to respond in a new way to an increase in lower-level offending. They worked with the Center for Court Innovation to pioneer a model that locates a community court within a library, expanding the options that courts have to partner with the communities to best serve them in strategic ways. That model met several needs and has achieved a number of key goals. Over a dozen jurisdictions have either opened or are in the process of planning replications. This case study outlines how stakeholders in Spokane planned and implemented their community court to meet the city's unique needs. It highlights the opportunities and challenges that come with operating a program in a new context with new partners.



Street view of Spokane Public Library's downtown branch, which hosts weekly community court sessions.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING: HOW A LOCAL LIBRARY BECAME CENTER STAGE FOR JUSTICE REFORM IN SPOKANE

Located in eastern Washington, the City of Spokane has a population of 216,000. It is the largest city between Seattle and Minneapolis and forms a regional hub for medical services, shopping, and entertainment. Spokane's judicial system consists of a Superior Court and a District Court that have countywide jurisdiction, and a Municipal Court that has citywide jurisdiction.

As it began community court planning in 2010, Spokane was facing issues common among growing cities, including increased rates of homelessness and lower-level offenses such as trespassing and loitering. Court appearance rates were low, and for defendants who did appear and resolve their cases, the court had few resources to offer that might address underlying issues,

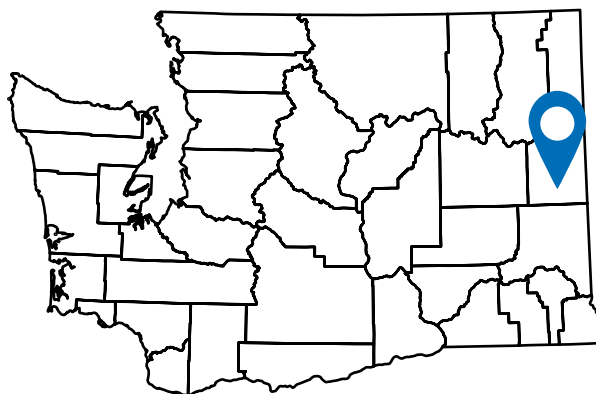
either as part of sentencing or to access voluntarily. Many defendants lacked any form of identification, which further prevented them from applying for benefits. Meanwhile, the Downtown Business Partnership had growing concerns about the homeless population near the city's commercial core.

CONDUCTING A COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

With expert assistance from the Center for Court Innovation, a multi-agency planning team committed to a thorough community needs assessment to better understand the nature and extent of these challenges, and explore creative solutions—such as a community court—with stakeholders from the justice system and the community. This process included police, prosecutors, defenders and the court, and was supported by the Spokane County Commissioners, the Spokane City Council, the mayor's office and the Spokane Regional Criminal Justice Commission. In keeping with community court planning best practices, it included not only input from local officials and social service providers but also significant community engagement.¹

The needs assessment resulted in several important findings. Many defendants faced cases in both Municipal and District courts. There was a high prevalence of petty theft, public intoxication, and offenses associated with homelessness, including loitering and trespassing, in Downtown Spokane. At the same time, many court users were also high users of emergency medical services. The court system was relying heavily on jail admissions to manage these problems, with few community-based alternatives and limited access to resources. To better understand the underlying issues that fueled offending, the stakeholders expressed interest in implementing a tool that evaluated the risk and needs of court users in order to improve legal decision-making and connections to services to best address the underlying drivers of criminal activity and risk for reoffending.

The needs assessment suggested that a community court model could be a successful vehicle to meet the city's needs. The idea was that a community court



Spokane's Downtown Community Court

Washington

might offer a forum to engage more meaningfully with high-contact court users in a way that is both legally proportionate and supported by social services and other sentencing alternatives, such as community service or connection to treatment and housing providers.

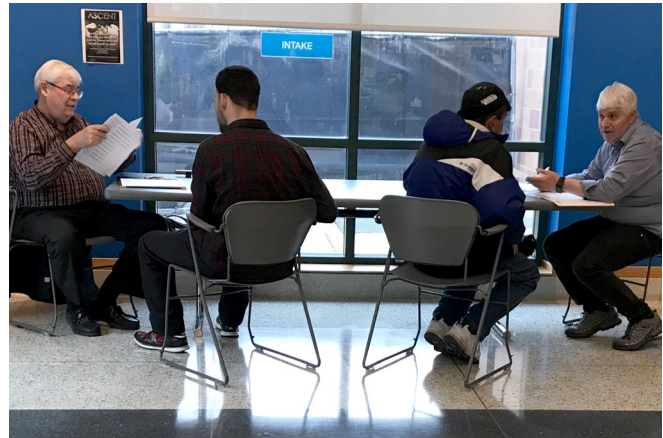
But planners grappled with the best way to engage the population that would be served by the new community court. They believed that the current locations of court and related services were a major barrier to engagement. Ideally, the program would meet defendants closer to where many already accessed services, minimizing the burden of transportation and, for those experiencing homelessness, the need to leave their belongings behind. Because many defendants congregated and committed low-level offenses near the downtown branch of the Spokane Public Library, stakeholders wondered whether it could be most effective to locate the new community court nearby.

SELECTING A LOCATION

Planners did not have far to look to arrive at a promising location for the court. Asset mapping conducted as part of the needs assessment identified that many high-contact court users were already visiting the downtown library branch itself to access services, including taking life-skills classes hosted by the Department of Probation and obtaining identification through library resources. Library staff on site were well-trained in issues that affect this population and had begun to build local partnerships to meet its diverse needs. Importantly, many of these library users already saw the the location as a trusted and valuable community resource.

In 2013, library leadership agreed to host the community court in the downtown branch, hoping it would bolster its mission to serve as a community of information.² The vision for Spokane's Downtown Community Court began to take shape. The local police chief was a noteworthy advocate as well, helping to ensure that the broader public understood the value of this unique partnership.

The program defined its purpose and mission as follows: *The Downtown Community Court of the City of Spokane seeks to reduce and properly address quality of life*



Trained community volunteers (far left and far right) explain the court process to potential participants.

offenses in the downtown area by utilizing a collaborative, problem-solving approach to crime. Via partnership with numerous government, community and faith-based organizations, the court endeavors to hold defendants accountable, address factors impacting defendants' criminal behavior, improve the quality of life in the downtown area, address victim needs, and increase public confidence in the local criminal justice system.

With the purpose, model, and location determined, planners set out to define how the program would operate.

IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES

Planning for any justice-system improvement is complicated and requires buy-in from a range of stakeholders. Partnership with a library was no exception and revealed some unique opportunities and challenges. The measures the Spokane partnership took to meet them yield lessons for others interested in planning a library-based community court.

« *This partnership is not just about access to books but how to recreate the library into something relevant for the community at large.* — Andrew Chanse, director, Spokane Public Library Board

Engaging the right stakeholders. In addition to key justice stakeholders (such as prosecutors, defenders,

judges and local law enforcement), Spokane formed partnerships with local library leadership, homeless coalitions, healthcare organizations, civil legal service providers, licensing departments, local universities, employment agencies, and the city's Downtown Business Partnership. This helped ensure that representatives from diverse but relevant sectors were on board and willing to contribute resources to the effort.

Engaging library patrons and staff in the planning process. Court and library staff met regularly during the planning process to work out logistics. A key feature of the program was that on-site voluntary services would be made available not just to community court participants but also to any library patron. Staff saw the opportunity to post flyers around the

library to share information widely about the new community court and the resources it offered.

Identifying and adapting space within the library. Although stakeholders supported the idea of holding court in the library, they needed sufficient space to accommodate an actual courtroom, court users, and social service providers. It was especially important that the court offer space for attorneys to meet with participants privately. The court also prioritized convening all service providers in one room in order to strengthen the impact of wrap-around services and community among providers themselves. They decided to create a self-contained space for the court with a separate, adjacent space for service providers.

Providing security. Planners needed to balance the court's typical security concerns with the public interest in providing regular access to the library. The court hired a security company that set up an officer at a screening table at the entrance of the library section where court is held. The security officer, who is present only on court days, uses a handheld magnetometer to screen people entering the court space, and issues security cards to court participants for bathroom access. For court participants experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity who travel to court with many belongings, court security offers a safe space for items to be secured while participants are meeting with the court team and providers.



Court security check in participants and offer secure storage for those carrying personal belongings.

Accessing technology. The court worked with the library to ensure that the facility provided fundamental technological requirements such as computers, a secure connection to court servers, and audio/video equipment. All court computers and service-provider computers use virtual private networks to safeguard confidential court and treatment-related information.

Securing the terms of tenancy. Planners explored whether the library could waive rent for the use of the space. This decision hinged on whether providing community court services could be considered a library service within public funding guidelines. The library determined that it would not charge the court for rent.

OPERATING A COMMUNITY COURT IN A LIBRARY SETTING

In December 2013, Spokane heard its first community court case in the downtown library. A range of cases are eligible for the program, including nonviolent misdemeanors within the area that the court serves. People with prior sex offenses are not eligible.

Spokane's Downtown Community Court process begins with the very first contact by law enforcement. Spokane Police Department officers—especially those assigned to the Downtown Precinct—are trained to divert individuals directly to service providers at community court on a voluntary basis, and to use citations as the last option.

What does it look like to hear cases in a library? In Spokane, court is held once a week. Before the court session begins, there is a weekly court staff and service provider meeting, in a confidential setting, to discuss the progress participants have made. When persons who have been issued citations arrive, they meet with court staff and service providers in the morning. Those attending court for the first time meet in the intake space outside the courtroom with a trained community volunteer, who explains the court process, which service providers are represented onsite, where the different court representatives sit, and how to access library services.

The prospective participant then meets one-on-one with a defense attorney to review the merits of their case, to discuss whether they want to opt in to the community court and, if so, describe how the case might proceed. For those who opt into the court, a probation officer completes a risk and needs assessment, which is used to identify appropriate social services.

Next, the community volunteer escorts prospective participants to the social services room next to the court to review the suggested referrals and introduce relevant service providers. The services on offer include housing assistance, mental health counseling, and substance use treatment. Additional services provide help obtaining official identification, education on food and nutrition, and access to library resources such as free computer and internet access and resume-writing classes. Prospective

participants also learn about a variety of tutorials and self-help resources the library offers.

Finally, prospective participants meet with Judge Mary Logan, who presides over community court. If a Stipulated Order of Continuance reflecting mandated conditions is agreed to by the parties, then participants remain on the Downtown Community Court's docket pending resolution. There are three possible tiers of supervision depending on legal leverage as well as risk level and need, which impact the duration of the Stipulated Order of Continuance (4 weeks, 3 months, or 6 months) and the types of service connections mandated. Upon compliance with the court-mandated conditions and successful completion of the program, participants graduate and their cases are dismissed.

MEETING CHALLENGES

Operating a community court in a library was an untested approach when Spokane began. Their challenges and solutions can help guide other planners.

Supporting court attendance. To ensure there is no confusion about where participants are scheduled to attend community court, the library's address is printed on all citations. Both police on the street and staff at local homeless shelters offer reminders to attend court on the mornings of the weekly sessions. Police officers sending people to community court are trained on the model and invited to attend court staff meetings, where they can provide updates on what they are seeing in the field that might affect attendance. Additionally, there are signs in the library lobby directing people to the community court.

Being creative with on-site resources. Community courts collaborate with social service providers to offer resources to their participants. Partnering with a library required creativity to establish as many agency linkages as possible, and to secure space best suited to hosting services.

Offering library patrons access to services. The court has consistently sought to make its services available

« *This set-up is as low-barrier-access as we could possibly get while still preserving the sanctity of the court room, ensuring privacy for service providers, and still allowing for openness to the public to access the service providers alone.* — Mary Logan, presiding judge, Spokane Community Court

not only to court participants but to all who visit the library. While challenging, this has increased the library's reach and reminded the community of the vital function the institution serves: providing public information and resources. Library staff have become knowledgeable about the court's service partners and help direct library users to them both on site and at their locations in the community. Court participants and other community members may find themselves side-by-side, for example, taking classes on responsible renting, employment applications, or nutrition. Offering these services has enhanced the "community of learning" the library fosters, according to Director Andrew Chanse.

Sharing space. The court functions and the service providers each needed dedicated space. As a result, when court is in session, a sliding door divides the library's large community room in half. The judge and attorneys hear

cases on one side, and service providers work with court participants on the other. This arrangement turns out to work well for all partner agencies, and at no additional cost to any of them.

Providing storage for participants' belongings. An unexpected challenge the court and library faced upon launching is that many participants experiencing housing instability carry their belongings with them to court. The library needed to designate space to accommodate their belongings. Every participant now receives a ticket to identify their items—similar to a coat-check system. A security officer supervises the space and returns the items when participants are finished with court. This

system has balanced security concerns with respect for participants' possessions.

Responding to participants' challenges. Even before the community court was established, the library experienced intravenous drug use in its bathrooms. Knowing that people facing substance use disorder would be using library facilities, the library and court team worked together to provide safe receptacles for used needles. Additionally, they installed a blue light system in all bathrooms, which makes it more difficult for intravenous users to see their veins, with the goal of deterring substance use in and around the library.

INDICATIONS OF SUCCESS

Since it launched, the court has shown strong indications of success.

As of early 2020, there have been over 700 graduates since the community court opened in 2013. Many participants are engaging with services instead of being caught up in the revolving door of the justice system. Perhaps most impressively, over 2,700 participants have accessed voluntary services while receiving no criminal citation. This includes 143 participants who received case management and housing; 121 who visited primary care physicians, reducing emergency room visits; 50 referred for dental services; and 223 who received reading glasses. The program has distributed 1,200 bus passes to participants and over 15,000 lunches. Over 3,500 community service hours have been completed. In 2019 alone, 104 individuals were connected to substance abuse treatment, 101 connected to mental health care services, and 147 were given housing referrals. On top of this, between 200 and 300 people who are not court-involved receive voluntary service referrals each month.

In August 2019, Washington State University published a process and outcome evaluation of the community court.³ The evaluation overall concluded that, in contrast with comparison groups of similarly situated defendants, there was a 12 percent lower recidivism rate for community court participants within 6 months of completing the

« *By removing barriers and stigma of traditional court spaces, we increase the likelihood of participants arriving for court as well as helping them view court as a safe and inviting place.* — Andrew Chanse, director, Spokane Public Library Board

program and a 16 percent lower recidivism rate within 12 months of completion. Importantly, the study found that, within the studied time period, the program served at least 1,166 voluntary “walk-in” clients who did not have a pending court case, with 41 percent of walk-in clients accessing services from the state’s Department of Social and Health Services, 40 percent receiving various legal services, and 50 percent pursuing employment services.

Finally, the community court operates at a very low cost, which makes it a sustainable model. The court pays no rent to the library, and its service-provider partners are paid through their organizations. The remainder of its costs include family reunification travel costs, bus passes, birth certificates to obtain identification, DOL vouchers, transportation to treatment, and lunches. These costs are covered by grants, as well as organizational and community donations. Spokane’s community court team makes the process of obtaining funding sustainable by regularly presenting on the court’s outcomes to City Council and and non-profit organizations operating in Spokane.

REPLICATING THE MODEL

The outcomes in Spokane make a strong case for establishing more library-based community courts, and the field has taken notice. In 2018, the court was recognized by the Center for Court Innovation as a mentor community court for its innovation and leadership, in part due to its unique library model. As a mentor court, it has hosted site visits for representatives from across the country and conducted webinars on creative ways to assist court participants facing homelessness.



Eugene, OR's replication of the Spokane library court model includes signage inviting all community members to access services.

At least five additional library-based programs have already launched in Spokane's wake, in each case with support of the National Community Court Program, which is administered by the Center for Court Innovation with support from the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance. For example, in 2016, the Eugene Community Court in Oregon launched in the city's downtown public library. In early 2019, Reno, Nevada, also launched its first community court in partnership with the Washoe County Public Library.

When implemented with fidelity to the community court model, library-based courts can be a powerful tool to hold justice-involved people accountable, connect them with vital social services, offer cost-effective, community-based options for people committing lower-level offenses, and enhance community safety and quality of life. Jurisdictions interested in learning more about the

Spokane Community Court—or other community court programs—can visit the Center for Court Innovation's website at courtinnovation.org, or contact info@courtinnovation.org. The Center's staff can facilitate visits to Spokane and other community courts, as well as assist in planning or enhancing a community court program.

ENDNOTES

1. Read more about planning a community court at the Center for Court Innovation's website: <https://www.courtinnovation.org/publications/planning-resources>.
2. See "Courting Libraries: Partnerships bring social services and restorative justice to communities," *American Libraries Magazine*, at: <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2019/06/03/courting-libraries-community-courts-restorative-justice/>
3. Hamilton, Z.K., Holbrook, M.A., Kigerl, A. *City of Spokane Municipal Community Court: Process and Outcome Evaluation* (2019). Washington State Institute for Criminal Justice. Retrieved from <https://static.spokane-city.org/documents/municipalcourt/therapeutic/sbcc-evaluation-report-2019.pdf>

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