



Community Courts: Stopping the Revolving Door

OVER THE PAST YEAR, the Institute has been working with the Newark Municipal Court to bring a community justice approach to Newark. The "community court" model, developed by the Center for Court Innovation (CCI), works to address head-on, not just crime, but the causes of crime in a community.

By empowering judges to impose alternative sentences like community service and social services (e.g. G.E.D classes or drug rehabilitation) outside of the traditional jail-or-fines sentencing paradigm, the community court model allows judges to address the issues that bring defendants to court in the first place, thereby better serving both the court's petty criminal defendants and the community at large.

Social services and community service projects are developed and linked to the court to combat the unemployment, drugs, mental illness, and neighborhood disorder that undermine a city's quality of life.

Working closely with CCI, the City of Newark's Municipal Court, Law Department, Office of the Public Defender and the Essex Vicinage Probation Division, the Institute has been hard at work determining what a community court could look like in Newark. A final report on feasibility and design has been completed and provides a comprehensive plan for transforming the Newark Municipal Court into a community court.

The Institute's contributions to the yearlong planning process included the planning and coordination of a community engagement process, consisting of eighteen community engagement forums, a bus trip with local community leaders to a community court in Brooklyn, and three intensive focus groups. This community engagement effort gave Newarkers an opportunity to voice what they perceived to be the biggest threats to their community, and what they thought would be the best social services or community services to require in lieu of jail and fines. In all, over 300 people participated, representing all five wards and the many age, race, and ethnic groups of Newark. The community court planning has incorporated these community priorities into the final recommendations.

Another aspect of the planning process was to collect information about how the Municipal Court presently operates and which types of cases appeared most frequently. To that end, the Institute oversaw a data collection project recording detailed information on every case that came before the court in a three-week period. With the final recommendations complete, we look forward to taking the next steps towards bringing community justice to the City of Newark.

