



# San Diego City Attorney Jan I. Goldsmith

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## NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: [Gerry Braun](mailto:gbraun@sandiego.gov), Director of Communications: [gbraun@sandiego.gov](mailto:gbraun@sandiego.gov) (619) 533-4782

### **Community Court Program Having Dramatic Success**

*Given a second chance, low-level offenders log 2,800 hours of community service*

More than 2,800 hours of community service have been performed through a unique San Diego program that allows people who commit low-level crimes to avoid a criminal record and jail by giving back to their community.

Since the San Diego Community Court Program was launched by the City Attorney's Office, its participants – generally young and first-time offenders – have paid their debts to society by planting trees, recycling waste products, painting out graffiti, clearing neighborhoods illegally dumped trash, and helping to provide services to the homeless.

The visible results have been less-crowded courtrooms and jails, and a higher quality of life for San Diegans.

But most importantly, City Attorney Jan Goldsmith said, many first-time offenders are being given a second chance to get their lives on track.

**“We created Community Court so these low-level offenders had a chance to keep their records clean and get on the right path before it’s too late,”** Goldsmith said. **“The public service they perform is just one of the many benefits, which also include millions of dollars in taxpayer savings.”**

**“What’s sorely missing in our misdemeanor courts is this kind of early intervention that can keep young or first-time offenders from becoming career criminals,”** Goldsmith said. **“If you look at the history of virtually any violent felon, you’ll find a time when they committed some sort of low-level misdemeanor and, almost without exception, received no personal attention.”**

Since November, 549 individuals have received the Community Court offer to avoid a criminal record by completing conditions that include 16 hours of service with one of two nonprofit social-service agencies, Alpha Project and the Urban Corps of San Diego County.

Of the 549 offers, 338 have been accepted and 211 have been rejected, a 62 percent acceptance rate.

Through last week, 120 of the 338 participants have reached their 90-day deadline to complete the terms of the offer. Of those, 106, or 88 percent, successfully completed the terms. Fourteen of the 120 participants failed to complete the program

Henry C. Coker, the Public Defender of San Diego County, said the program has allowed the San Diego courts to effectively deal with the increased workload created by Proposition 47.

**“The City Attorney's Community Court program has been an immediate success -- not only by diverting nonviolent and non-serious offenders out of the criminal justice system but by generating thousands of work hours performed by our clients that directly benefit the San Diego Community,”** Coker said.

Many of the eligible offenders had committed so-called “quality of life” crimes, such as disturbing the peace, petty theft, vandalism under \$950, illegal lodging, trespass and public intoxication. They often appreciate the opportunity for their community service to be targeted at the neighborhoods they harmed.

**“This is an amazing partnership and a win-win for everyone involved,”** Bob McElroy, the President and CEO of Alpha Project, said. **“For individuals with minor offenses, it allows them to give back to the community instead of receiving a conviction on their record while saving the taxpayers thousands of dollars in court expenses.”**

**“The Community Court experience has been positive for the vast majority of participants,”** says Sam Lopez, who heads up the program for Urban Corps. **“These folks are eager sign up, quietly perform their community service work, and at the end of the day express gratitude for the opportunity to clear their name by giving back to the City of San Diego.”**

Once the conditions are completed, Community Court participants will have their cases dismissed – meaning the crime does not appear on their record.

If they fail to complete the 16 hours of community service, they are sentenced to jail for three to five days, based on the guilty plea they entered for their crime. The Sheriff's Department, another partner in Community Court, reserves jail space for the program to ensure that failing to meet its conditions has swift consequences.

The program also has strong support from the ACLU of California, which wants to see it expand throughout the state.

The ACLU's criminal justice and drug policy director, Margaret Dooley-Sammuli, called it **“a common-sense approach to handling misdemeanor offenses which promises to improve public safety, improve outcomes for program participants by linking them to resource providers, and ultimately save taxpayer dollars.”**

**“As jurisdictions across the state continue to implement Proposition 47, the San Diego Community Court may serve as a model new approach designed to improve public safety and save taxpayer money,”** Dooley-Sammuli said. **“The ACLU is excited to coordinate with the San Diego City Attorney and other Community Court partners as the program progresses and expands.”**

Goldsmith, a former judge, said the program will save taxpayers millions of dollars this year.

By reducing cases to a single court appearance, the program eliminates the public costs of pre-trial motions, trials and appeals. Those include the costs and salaries of the courtroom and its personnel, the prosecutors, law-enforcement witnesses and often public defendants. Goldsmith said those resources can now be directed to more serious crimes and other public benefits.

### **About the Urban Corps of San Diego County:**

Since 1989, the Urban Corps has served as a bridge to a better life for thousands of inner-city youth. The organization provides paid green job training in the fields of recycling, conservation and community service while offering young people a second chance to earn their high school diploma at the onsite Urban Corps Charter School.

Through their participation in the Urban Corps program, Corpsmembers remove graffiti, plant trees, clear waterways, restore habitat, and collect recyclables for the City of San Diego. Local residents also benefit from the programs' Community Improvement Services, which beautify business districts through a variety of services such as power washing, debris removal and landscaping, which help keep shopping districts clean and safe. After completing the program, Corpsmembers are not only more employable, but they know the importance of giving back to community and preserving resources. Most importantly, they have the life skills and confidence needed to succeed in the workforce. Approximately 80 percent of Corpsmembers leave the program with employment or enrolled in higher education."

### **About Alpha Project:**

Alpha Project is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) human services organization that serves over 4,000 men, women, and children each day. Services offered include affordable housing, residential substance abuse treatment, supportive housing for people with special needs, basic and emergency services for the homeless, transportation assistance, mental health counseling, employment training, preparation and placement, emergency shelter, HIV/AIDS, education, outreach and prevention, and community services.

The mission of the Alpha Project is to empower individuals, families, and communities by providing work, recovery and support services to people who are motivated to change their lives and achieve self-sufficiency. The agency's many programs are available to all persons in need regardless of race, creed, color, ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

Alpha Project strives not to manage homelessness, but rather to end it for its clients by offering jobs not handouts, respect not pity and empowerment not control. We provide the homeless with the tools they need to be the very best they can be.

Each program offered by the Alpha Project focuses on assisting participants to attain their own optimal level of independence. For most of our program participants, successful completion of our programs will mean complete and permanent independence through education, employment, sobriety, and stability. For those clients with special needs, our programs maximize their own potential and support as much independence as possible. All of our clients regardless of their history are encouraged, supported, and assisted in reaching their maximum potential with dignity and respect.

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