



San Diego City Attorney Jan I. Goldsmith

NEWS RELEASE

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Misdemeanor Diversion Program Hits New Milestone *More than 5,000 hours of community service logged by low-level offenders*

San Diego neighborhoods have benefited from more than 5,000 hours of community service under a unique program that allows people who commit low-level crimes to avoid a criminal record and jail by giving back to their community.

The milestone was achieved earlier this month by participants in the San Diego Community Court Program, a pilot program launched by the City Attorney's Office in partnership with the Sheriff's Department, Public Defender's Office and two social-service organizations, Alpha Project and the Urban Corps of San Diego County.

The program allows offenders who are charged with low-level misdemeanors to pay their debt to society through service programs that have included planting trees, recycling waste, painting out graffiti, clearing neighborhoods of illegally dumped trash and providing services to the homeless.

Once the conditions are met, the case is dismissed without the participant returning to court and the charge never appears on the participant's record.

To date, the City Attorney's Office has made Community Court offers to 558 people, generally young and first-time offenders.

Of the 558 offers, 398 (64 percent) were accepted.

Of the 398 individuals who accepted offers, 321 (81 percent) successfully completed the 16 hours of community service and other conditions of the program.

The remaining 77 failed to complete the conditions within 90 days. Under the program's terms, they are then sentenced to time in custody. Bench warrants are issued for any who do not return to court for sentencing.

The community service is conducted through two San Diego non-profits: Alpha Project, which provides services, training and emergency shelter to homeless people, and Urban Corps, which gives young people jobs in green fields like recycling, conservation and community improvement projects. In addition to keeping their records clear, program participants can take advantage of services available at the program sites, including job referrals, education centers and treatment programs.

By reducing cases to a single court appearance, the program reduces the strain on court calendars that is created by multiple hearings and pre-trial motions.

City Attorney Jan Goldsmith, a former judge, said the program is expected to save the courts millions of dollars this year.

"However, the program's greatest value comes each time early intervention succeeds in putting a young or first-time offender on a better path," Goldsmith said. **"Having a criminal conviction, even for a misdemeanor, can mean the difference in whether someone gets a job or not. Instead, we are connecting people with services and some are choosing to get high school diplomas. They are less likely to return to court later, and under more serious circumstances."**

“We are seeing immediate returns from this one-year pilot program and will be carefully expanding it in terms of numbers and community participation,” he said.

Community Court participants praise the program for diverting non-violent, non-serious offenders from the criminal justice system and into productive endeavors that help restore their self-respect and sense of community involvement.

“Every day I hear from people who are so grateful to have this opportunity to keep their records clean while doing something worthwhile for the community,” Alpha Project President and CEO Bob McElroy said. **“This is a program where everybody wins. It’s a solution to these folks’ problems, a benefit to the community and a savings for taxpayers.”**

Current Urban Corps programs that involve Community Court participants include the Recycling Buyback Center at Qualcomm Stadium and a Caltrans tree-planting and irrigation project at the 805/905 freeway interchange in South Bay.

“These young people are eager for this chance to clear their records and give something back to San Diego,” said Sam Lopez, who runs the program for the Urban Corps of San Diego County. **“It has taken a negative part of their lives and turned it into a positive experience.”**

Along with the Sheriff’s Department and the Public Defender’s Office, the American Civil Liberties Union has been a strong supporter of the program.

“The recent numbers from the Community Court support the promise of this program to improve community connection and public safety, reduce unnecessary incarceration, and save taxpayer money,” Kellen Russoniello of the ACLU of San Diego and Imperial Counties said. **“The San Diego City Attorney’s Office deserves credit for this smart approach, and other jurisdictions should take note.”**

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