



San Diego City Attorney Jan I. Goldsmith

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: December 17, 2015

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

Community Court Program Gets Boost from Smart Prosecution Initiative

Grant allows expansion to include illegal lodging, drug offenders

Building on a highly successful first year, the San Diego Community Court program will expand its scope in 2016 so that more low-level and first-time offenders can choose paths that lead them away from further criminal activity.

The expansion, which is partly funded by a \$415,599 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Smart Prosecution Initiative, will provide services that help address Community Court participants' underlying needs. In the pilot program's first year, more than 600 individuals avoided criminal records and paid their debt to society through community service.

Key program enhancements will include:

- Screening of program participants to assess individual needs (such as housing, education, job training and treatment programs) that may put them at risk of committing additional crimes
- A dedicated case manager to provide participants with personal counseling and direction in accessing to service providers and enrolling in treatment programs

As these enhancements are put into effect, eligibility for Community Court programs can be broadened to include people who are arrested on misdemeanor drug charges and for illegal lodging, a charge brought against homeless individuals who sleep on the streets and refuse to accept placement in shelters.

“Early intervention is critical to helping young and first-time offenders get their lives back on track on not become career criminals,” City Attorney Jan Goldsmith said. **“The Smart Prosecution grant demonstrates that the approach we’re taking in San Diego can be a model for other jurisdictions. Our Community Court partners are committed to expanding this program slowly and thoughtfully as it gives greater personal attention to the participants most at risk of committing future offenses.”**

Partners in the program voted unanimously last month to continue the program, which began as a one-year pilot project. Program partners include the San Diego Sheriff's Department, the Office of the Public Defender, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), the American Civil Liberties Union, and two San Diego

Recent City Attorney media releases can be accessed on the San Diego City Attorney's home page located on the Internet at <http://www.sandiegocityattorney.org>

1200 Third Avenue, Suite 1620, San Diego, California 92101-4188 (619) 236-6220

service providers, Alpha Project and the Urban Corps of San Diego County. The program is led by Chief Deputy City Attorney Jamie Ledezma, who heads the Neighborhood Prosecution Unit of the Criminal Division.

Community Court was launched in 2014, and over its first year in operation had 602 participants who performed nearly 10,000 hours of community service through Alpha Project and the Urban Corps of San Diego County. Participants are required to complete 16 hours of service, doing things like planting trees, recycling waste products, painting out graffiti, clearing neighborhoods of illegally dumped trash, and helping provide services to the homeless.

This year, the City Attorney's Office partnered with SANDAG to apply for the two-year Smart Prosecutions Initiative grant. The Smart Prosecution Initiative furthers the Department of Justice's mission by assisting state and local jurisdictions in preventing and reducing crime. Its goal is to develop a body of knowledge about data-driven strategies -- innovative, best-practice, or evidenced-base -- as they are implemented by prosecutors.

Under the grant, SANDAG will analyze participant information and program operations to give ongoing feedback on its effectiveness. Armed with this "action research," the program partners can make in-progress adjustments that help deliver the best outcomes for participants.

"SANDAG is excited to work with the City of San Diego on this national evaluation," Cynthia Burke, Ph.D., the director of SANDAG's Applied Research Division, said. **"This research partnership will help ensure expansion goals are realized and measure recidivism outcomes in the short- and long-term and help us understand if the program is cost-effective. It will also provide useful information to other jurisdictions interested in implementing best practices."**

Critical to the expansion is conducting a risk-needs assessment after a participant pleads guilty and accepts a Community Court offer. This assessment will determine the risk to reoffend and personal needs for each individual, and be conducted by the Sheriff's Reentry Services Division, which currently conducts assessments to determine suitability for custody.

This formal screening will distinguish high-risk from low-risk participants, and assess for participants who may benefit from individualized approaches to prevention and intervention. Those individuals will complete a one-hour meeting with a case manager in addition to community service.

San Diego Sheriff Bill Gore said his department will provide this service as part of its commitment to Community Court's goal of combining real consequences with positive outcomes.

"This is a win-win for all," Gore said. **"Offenders realize there are consequences for their actions, and the communities benefit from their various program assignments. Sometimes, a different approach will yield a different result."**

The case manager will work on-site at Alpha Project, a nonprofit human services organization that offers such services as residential substance abuse treatment, supportive housing for people with special needs, basic and emergency services for the homeless, transportation assistance, mental health counseling, and employment training, preparation and placement.

Alpha Project CEO Bob McElroy said his organization is excited to be part of the expansion, particularly one that will give participants additional tools to turn around their lives.

“Community Court treats each participant with respect and empowers them to turn around their lives,” McElroy said. **“These principles are essential to addressing issues like homelessness and drug abuse, and bode well for its long-term success.”**

Participants who do not need individual counseling will continue to be referred to Alpha Project and the Urban Corps of San Diego County for their 16 hours of community service. Once those hours are completed, the case is dismissed and the conviction is removed from the participant’s record.

“Community Court participants are getting so much more than just a clean record through this program,” says Robert Chávez, CEO of Urban Corps. **“Not only are they learning new skills, but the vast majority are connecting with the importance of being a San Diegan whose actions take care of the community rather than take away from it.”**

Participants in service projects run by the Urban Corps are asked to complete a follow-up survey about their Community Court/Urban Corps experience, and Chavez provided a sampling of quotes from those surveys:

On skills learned through community service participation:

- “I learned some landscaping skills and how to use a bailer.”
- “I learned that San Diego needs a lot of help to clean the city. My time here was a good experience and I was able to meet new people.”
- “I learned the process of recycling and where it ends up afterwards.”
- “Don’t take things for granted and have respect for hard work...”

On the take-away from participation:

- “I am lucky that I got to be part of this program instead of being on probation.”
- “I will take away that this is a good company and I enjoyed serving my community service with them.”
- “Be aware of how to benefit the community.”
- “Be smart with my choice and with a group of people we can work together to clean the city.”
- “I will take away good community skills and how to take care of the community.”
- “Follow the law”

The American Civil Liberties Union has been a prominent supporter of Community Court, which Kellen Russoniello, Staff Attorney for the ACLU of San Diego and Imperial Counties, calls a “common-sense approach to justice.”

“Through community service and connection to support services, individuals are held accountable to the community without wasting taxpayer dollars on unnecessary incarceration,” Russoniello said. **“We look forward to the program’s expansion, which promises to maximize benefits to the City and its residents by providing further resources for participants.”**

###