



Philadelphia Community Court: A Model for Other Pennsylvania Cities

By William Babcock

The Center City District is a business improvement district located in downtown Philadelphia. Incorporated in 1991 and funded by annual assessments on Center City property owners, its mission is to make the downtown clean, safe and attractive. It is difficult to miss the teal-and-blue uniformed sidewalk sweepers and community service representatives who keep the streets clean and provide a myriad of services to those living, working and visiting Center City. But there was a persistent, vexing problem.

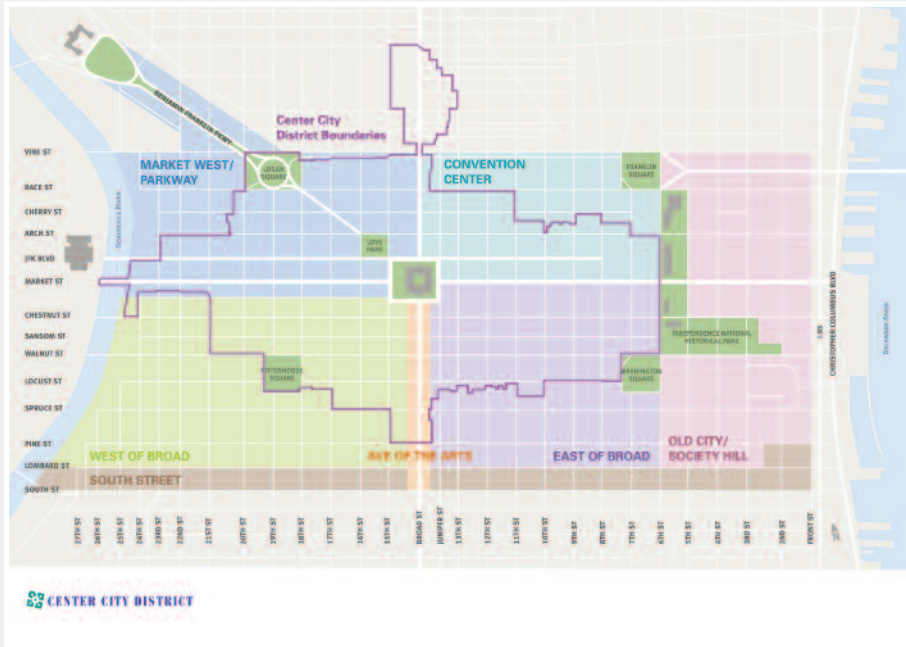
The Center City District surveys its various audiences annually to find out what people like and don't like about the area. The initial surveys showed that while people were pleased with the cleaner sidewalks, they continued to be concerned with public safety. That meant quality-of-life crimes such as street-corner prostitution, graffiti and retail theft. These were offenses that to a large extent fell through the cracks in the Philadelphia criminal justice system.

Those arrested for non-violent misdemeanors were routinely given non-cash bail and released without supervision and

with future court dates set at least 30 days out. Many simply failed to appear for their next hearings. Data gathered by the Philadelphia Police Department showed that approximately 70 percent of the arrestees were using illegal drugs or alcohol upon arrest and an overlapping 20 percent had mental health issues. Thus many of these defendants were returning to the streets to commit the same crimes — or worse — for the same reasons. Those given summary citations did not have bail hearings, but they otherwise fit the same description.

In January 1994, Center City District staff visited New York City's Midtown Community Court in Manhattan. The Midtown Community Court was the first of its kind and was created to address the same quality-of-life problems in the Times Square district as those identified in Center City Philadelphia. Visits to the community court by representatives of Philadelphia criminal justice, social service and community organizations followed. These groups then formed a steering committee to determine the viability of a community court in Center City Philadelphia and to raise the funds needed to hire a project coordinator. In 1998 I was hired by the Center City District to fill that role. We formed a working group and spent the next four years planning the project, which opened in February 2002.

The largest hurdle was the drafting of an operational plan to guide this new approach to doing business in the court system — a task made more difficult by the fact that the criminal justice system is composed of adversaries. The goal was to get defendants before the judge as quickly as possible and to offer them community service and social services in exchange for a suspended guilty plea. Completion of the terms of the sentence would result in the withdrawal of the charges. Community service required the defendants to take responsibility for their behavior and to pay back the neighborhoods that had



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borhoods it served, a Community Advisory Panel was formed, with neighborhood representatives from each of the eight police districts. The panel's bimonthly meetings were attended by one of the eight district police commanders on a rotating basis.

Advisory panel members and the police shared information on the problems affecting the communities and the steps the police were or would be taking to address them. This interaction also provided an opportunity to identify community service assignments that would most benefit the neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, loss of funding related to the economic crisis forced the community court to close in September 2011. But by any measure it was a success and remains a model for adoption by other Pennsylvania cities struggling to deal with quality-of-life crimes.

Consider these statistics from the Philadelphia Community Court, current through spring 2011:

- More than 75,000 cases heard.
- More than 13,000 defendants attended treatment readiness and anger management classes held on site.
- More than 2,100 defendants were given full drug and alcohol assessments, with almost 550 subsequently completing long-term treatment.
- The on-site public health nurse saw almost 4,200 defendants, primarily those charged with prostitution or drug possession, for health care screening and testing and counseling on sexually transmitted diseases.

been harmed. Social services addressed the underlying needs of the defendants, including drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues and non-treatment needs such as housing, thus decreasing the chances of the defendants' further involvement with the criminal justice system.

Two significant developments helped keep the agencies at the table and the process moving forward. The first was a two-year grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts to fund the social services and community service staff. The second was a grant from the Penn's Landing/Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation Joint Operating Committee to renovate space for the Philadelphia Community Court.

Manhattan's Midtown Community Court had established the importance of taking a judge out of the main criminal courthouse and placing him or her in a smaller building in the neighborhood to be served, where social services could be blended with criminal justice. The space selected in Philadelphia was an empty floor in the building that housed pretrial services and adult probation and parole programs. With the help of an architect, the vacant space allowed the working group to design the facility from scratch, with a courtroom, police holding area,

offices, and social service and health care program space.

Agreement on an operational plan and its adoption by the participating agencies was formally reached in a memorandum of understanding in July 2001. By February 2002, police, court staff, an assistant district attorney, a public defender, program personnel and administrative staff began working together on one floor, functioning as a unit to fashion constructive sentences designed to end the cycle of crime while making the neighborhoods safer.

The geographical boundaries of the court originally were intended to include only Philadelphia's 6th and 9th Police Districts. For various reasons the boundaries were expanded until the Philadelphia Community Court's jurisdiction included eight police districts covering almost 30 square miles and serving a population of about 400,000. The result, at the court's peak, was an average of 45 new arrests a day, with approximately the same number of status hearings.

As the boundaries expanded, the court began serving more than one community. To maintain communication between the community court and the diverse neigh-

- Defendants performed almost 540,000 hours of community service at a minimum-wage value to the communities of almost \$3.3 million.
- More than \$1.6 million in fines and costs was collected.
- More than \$40,000 was paid in direct restitution to victims.

In addition, statistics kept by the Defender Association of Philadelphia, which represented defendants charged with misdemeanors, showed the conviction rates for their clients on new arrests after appearing in Philadelphia Community Court in the three years 2007 through 2009 were, respectively, 13.6 percent, 11.2 percent and 6.5 percent. That compares favorably to the conviction rates of those who either rejected or were rejected by the community court for the same years: 25 percent, 33.3 percent and 23.1 percent.

Seeing people turn their lives around, control their addictions, find employment and a place to live, reconnect with their families and restore their sense of self-worth tells a compelling story about what the justice system can accomplish through a problem-solving approach to criminal behavior.

In recognition of the program's success, in 2009 the federal Bureau of Justice Assistance asked the Philadelphia Community Court to serve as one of four community court mentor sites in the United States.

While many of the community courts around the country are designed to assist a particular neighborhood in a large metropolitan area, one of the model's advantages is its amazing flexibility. The Midtown Community Court in Manhattan and the Philadelphia Community Court were created to address problems in central business districts, but other community courts, such as the Red Hook Community Justice Center in Brooklyn, have been designed to help distressed neighborhoods.

And as the Philadelphia Community Court illustrates, it is possible for a community court to cover more than one



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neighborhood. Connecticut's successful Hartford Community Court is the best example of a smaller city (population 124,775 as of the 2010 census) creating such a court with citywide jurisdiction.

Rather than following a rigid format, the focus is on the needs of the community, or communities, being served. At Red Hook, for example, because of the number of landlord-tenant disputes arising in local public housing, the judge's jurisdiction has been expanded so that a defendant's criminal and civil matters can be heard at the same time.

Nor is it necessary to renovate a building or hire new social service staff. There are many examples of community courts

around the country that work out of existing facilities and coordinate with social services already available.

A successful community court is one that addresses the needs of the community, and there are many creative ways of accomplishing that goal. ♦



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