

COMMUNITY COURT IS THE PEOPLE'S COURT

By: Court Executive Officer Kim Turner

At the annual Hearts of Marin award ceremony, the Marin County Superior Court's novel, solution-based Community Court program was hailed when it received the prestigious Excellence in Innovation award. This award recognizes the amazing synergy that comes from government/non-profit collaboration to design innovative approaches to resolving problems that affect the quality of life for all Marin residents, but particularly for those living at the margins of society. Such a partnership was formed two years ago when the Court, Legal Aid of Marin and St. Vincent De Paul Society decided to address the issues of how disadvantaged defendants with minor offenses, who are often homeless and frequently mentally or physically disabled, can successfully resolve their cases in the court system while also connecting with much-needed social services, medical treatment, rehabilitation services and job seeking assistance. With these underlying goals and aspirations in mind, and despite the Court's ongoing budget challenges, the Community Court was founded in April 2011.

Community Court is conducted once a month at St. Vincent's Free Dining Hall in San Rafael, as the dining hall is a familiar, non-threatening environment for many of the defendants who decide to appear at the court. But even though the court setting appears makeshift, Court Commissioner Beverly Wood presides over official court proceedings just as she would at the courthouse. She has heard hundreds of infraction cases in this forum from defendants who find it difficult to navigate any bureaucracy, much less the justice system. Most of the cases are "lifestyle" violations such as sleeping in the park, open container, jaywalking and safe bicycle operation, but these defendants frequently do not have the money to pay the fines or enough personal stability to deal with the adverse consequences of these violations. Many are fearful of coming to the courthouse or find it logistically challenging to do so. Often, to resolve these infraction violations, Commissioner Wood will order a defendant to make an appointment to seek public assistance, get a California ID card, go to a job seeking workshop or meet with drug and alcohol or mental health services as a way to both satisfy the fine and help link a defendant with services that can help them on the path to self-sufficiency and stability. She will also order defendants to perform community service work to 'work off' some of their fines and to help defendants re-engage in their communities.

Legal Aid attorneys and volunteers meet with defendants before court to ensure that they are prepared to address all outstanding violations. They also support the defendants when they appear before Commissioner Wood. In addition to providing space to conduct court proceedings, St. Vincent's staff and volunteers are instrumental in marketing the court to people who frequent the dining room. They help defendants referred from other non-profits to show up for their appearances and support those who appear in court in fulfilling the tasks ordered by the court. St. Vincent's is able to facilitate those initial connections between defendants and service providers.

In its two years of operation, Community Court has celebrated many successes and not just for those who were able to resolve old infraction charges. A number of defendants have improved their personal situations by gaining housing, getting jobs and maintaining sobriety because of the level of monitoring and personal support provided to them by the Community Court team. Not only is this a benefit for defendants, it can also be a big win for the community as these defendants find their way off the streets and into supportive and productive living situations.

The Court is gratified to work with Legal Aid of Marin and the St. Vincent's to create a community-based program with demonstrated success in working with a population for which such success is often elusive. We thank Hearts of Marin for recognizing this program with its Excellence in Innovation award for 2012.