

a non-traditional approach to addressing traditional problems

# Seattle Community Court

## Introducing Community Court 2.0

In October 2013, Seattle Municipal Court launched an ambitious update to its innovative Community Court. The Court, which began in 2005, provides an alternative path from the traditional escalating incarceration approach for people charged with “quality of life” crimes (e.g. theft, trespass, prostitution). Using ideas of restorative justice, people accepted into Community Court give back to society by participating in community service projects throughout the City. With over 15 partners, the work is varied and greatly benefits local organizations.

In addition to giving back, Community Court’s other focus is on getting participants the help they need to put their lives on a better path. One of the major recent changes is an emphasis on creating an individualized plan for each person coming into Community Court. Whereas the original program had a one size fits all approach, the new version recognizes that some people benefit from

greater structure in their lives while others may benefit from having a more limited contact with the criminal justice system. Another major change is an emphasis in helping participants take bigger steps in addressing the underlying issues that may have led to their criminal behavior. These steps might include getting assistance in signing up for housing or public benefits, starting a GED or job training program, or even participating in chemical dependency or mental health treatment. Even with these changes, the old goal of helping participants to help themselves remains.

While much has changed about Community Court, it still remains a firm partnership between the Court, the City Attorney’s Office and the Associated Counsel for the Accused / King County Department of Public Defense. Working together in a collaborative approach ensures that each participant is treated with respect and is given every opportunity to succeed. This time of change for Community Court

has been both challenging and rewarding as we see how the implemented updates are making such a positive impact on people’s lives. As we move forward, we strive to seek the proper balance between holding people accountable for their actions and providing them the services they need to keep them out of the criminal justice system. When it began, Community Court’s slogan was “a non-traditional approach to addressing traditional problems.” We hope that with the updates to the program we continue to be innovators and continue our quest to make Seattle a safer and more just place to live.



### Fall 2014 newsletter

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*“...we had a great foundation but, as with anything worth keeping, the program needed some remodeling and revitalization “*

## Executive Committee Perspectives, *from the Bench*



**The Honorable Karen Donohue,  
Community Court Judge**

When Seattle Community Court was created in 2005 one of the overriding goals was to help change the way people think about chronic criminal behavior: not as cases to be processed, but as problems to be resolved and relationships to be developed and maintained. A formula, of sorts, was developed to address this goal. Over a two week period, defendants were required to complete community service and make contact with social services. If they were successful, the case would be closed. If they were unsuccessful, they would be required to serve a set period of time in custody.

When I was assigned to preside over Community Court in 2013, I was asked to look at this formula and determine if it was still viable. After months of reviewing the program with the Center for Court Innovation and our community justice partners, the Seattle Community Court Executive Team concluded that we had a great foundation but, as with anything worth keeping, the program needed some remodeling and revitalization.

We agreed that several existing components were vital to the program: deep collaboration among the different parties, plenty of community service, interaction and responsibility on the part of offenders.

Seattle Community Court requires defendants to get help with their problem, whether it's homelessness, addiction treatment, getting health care or continuing their education. Because many Community Court offenders are individuals who suffer from chronic addiction and homelessness, we recognized that the two week jurisdiction under the old model was never really going to address the offenders' needs. Therefore, we extended court jurisdiction on some cases up to six months to allow time for more individual attention and case management from the Court's Probation Services Department. We have also tailored sanctions, services and treatment options to address individual needs and any non-compliance with court orders rather than utilizing a one-size-fits-all type of approach.

Now, rather than just meeting with a representative from a chemical dependency or mental health provider, some defendants are required to have a chemical dependency evaluation and enroll in treatment. Almost all are required to attend a Self Awareness Workshop. We have programs available to introduce offenders, among other things, to the Seattle Public Library, complete their GED and apply for employment, health care and housing.

Offenders in Community Court continue to perform many hours of community service (including, but not limited to graffiti abatement, community gardening at Yesler Terrace and Danny Woo Community Garden and office work at Mary's Place), part of a restorative justice strategy designed to start building connection and community. The approach does not work for everyone. It is not the traditional adversarial court program where legal issues are argued and cases are set for trial, which is what prosecutors and defense attorneys are typically trained to do. It is not a court in which we can always see measurable outcomes, such as changes in recidivism. It is a court which requires a balance of toughness and compassion. It is a court where a defendant who is ready to make some lifestyle changes can get help so that he or she will get out of the criminal justice cycle. It is a court where sometimes our failures are successes and sometimes success means showing up for hearings and keeping in contact with probation.

Our revisions are too fresh to measure any long term effects that the court may have on those defendants who opt into the program. However, the court monitors compliance with all conditions imposed and early data is promising. In the first two quarters of 2014, over 760 social service contacts were made and over 2750 hours of community service were completed. Further time will tell whether we are successful in reaching our ultimate goal of improved lifestyle and decreased recidivism.



## Our newest partner- Seattle Public Utilities

This year, Seattle Community Court has teamed up with Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) to clean up graffiti. So far, Community Court participants have visited 17 different sites and painted over the graffiti left there. Many of the sites have required multiple visits, as our paint provides a fresh canvas for taggers.

Over time, we see less and less graffiti at these locations, a trend we hope will continue. During one of our first days of graffiti abatement we were lucky to have Jerry as a participant. He had painted professionally for years and had some concerns about our technique. After being trained by Jerry in the ways of the roller, we continued. We

covered more graffiti than anyone expected, including SPU.

Today our crews still use what we like to call the "Jerry Method" and we still cover more graffiti than anyone expects us to. Before Community Court can be asked to paint, the graffiti must be reported. SPU then checks the site for hazards and has a waiver signed by the owner.



To report graffiti to SPU, please call 206-684-0228 or use the [City of Seattle's Find It, Fix It app.](#)

## An AmeriCorps Year in Review

It's been a lovely summer at the Seattle Community Court. Emily and I have transitioned from AmeriCorps members to temporary court employees and are now preparing to train the next generation of AmeriCorps members, Anupreet Sidhu and Kirsten Fahlbusch.

Our community service crews have spent the last few months planting and harvesting hundreds of pounds of produce on Marra Farm, assisted in building a retaining wall at Danny Woo International Garden, and created a nurturing landscape for young fruit trees at Meadowbrook Community Orchard. We've also welcomed Brian Puhl, driver and community service supervisor, to the team and the gears are running smoother than ever.

Through the grace, flexibility, and diversity of our community partners, service with the

Seattle Community Court provides rewarding opportunities for participants to explore new skillsets and work in a team atmosphere on community-based projects. On certain weeks, a participant can pick carrots at Marra Farm on Tuesday afternoon and hand these very carrots out on Wednesday or Thursday at Beacon Ave Food Bank or St. Vincent DePaul Food Bank in Georgetown. Such holistic experiences allow individuals to re-establish healthy relationships within the community while learning about food access, nutritional living, and the operations of major social service providers.

The court's ultimate goal is that these healthy practices continue and evolve into sustainable habits once participants graduate from the program. The Self Awareness Workshop is an important step in this process.

Within the workshop, Emily and I facilitate discussion and activities that encourage individuals to discover and define personal parameters for healthier living. (cont'd)



Joey and Emily pose with Rachel Duthler (in green) from Danny Woo Gardens

## SEATTLE COMMUNITY COURT

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Seattle, WA 98124-4667



[http://www.seattle.gov/  
communitycourt/](http://www.seattle.gov/communitycourt/)

## An AmeriCorps Year in Review , continued

Participants bring their unique histories to the class and find that many others struggle with similar issues such as homelessness, chemical dependency, and unemployment. Through this bond, individuals encourage each other through compassionate listening and understanding, and by sharing strategies and resources that have aided in positive personal change.

The workshop's newest guest speaker, Eileen Corcoran, a social worker for LEAD, has a similar background to many Community Court participants. Her story testifies to the tremendous changes that can occur within a lifetime. She inspires others to grow from and value past struggles and redirect these experiences into helping others take positive steps in their own path to recovery.

In the last year, Emily and I have challenged ourselves to be sources of positivity, advocacy, and information for Community Court participants. We have not tired in these roles because community is reciprocal by nature. The diverse and beautiful individuals that passed through the program happily matched our energy, knowledge, and enthusiasm, making this a truly impactful experience for all.

*AmeriCorps members Joey Horan and Emily Caris have been with Seattle CC since the Fall of 2013. We thank them for their outstanding service and dedication, and wish them all the best.*

### QUESTIONS?

Please contact-  
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## — THANK YOU — to our Community Service Partners

Beacon Avenue Food Bank, since 2011

City of Seattle Neighborhood Pea Patch, since 2008

City of Seattle Office of Emergency Management, since 2009

City of Seattle Public Utilities Graffiti Rangers, since 2014

Danny Woo Community Gardens, since 2009

Lake City Lions Club, since 2008

Marra Farms, since 2013

Mary's Place Day Shelter for Women, since 2010

Meadowbrook Community Cares, since 2008

Metropolitan Improvement District / Downtown Seattle Association, since 2005

Neighborhood House, since 2011

Operation Sack Lunch, since 2005

Real Change News, since 2011

Seattle Indian Center, since 2012

St. Vincent de Paul Food Bank, since 2008

Union Gospel Mission, since 2012

University District Food Bank, since 2013

YWCA of Seattle, King County , since 2012



**Community Court participant helping a food bank client carry groceries.**