



# IMPACT

## BRONX COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS NEWSLETTER

Bronx Community Solutions provides the courts with increased sentencing options for low-level offenses such as drug possession, shoplifting, and prostitution. By combining punishment with help, Bronx Community Solutions aims to hold offenders accountable for their offenses, pay back crime-plagued Bronx communities, and help offenders avoid further criminal behavior.

### Quick Facts:

- Over **12,000** offenders participate in Bronx Community Solutions annually.
- Since Bronx Community Solutions began assisting the court with DWI/DUI cases in June of 2008, roughly **800** offenders have been screened to determine whether or not they needed substance abuse treatment.
- Bronx Community Solutions maintains a compliance rate of **70%**, up 40% from before the project began.

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## The Youth Empowerment Forum

“I want to be the voice of my community.” That was the main reason Michael Patterson, a senior at JFK High School, decided to intern at Bronx Community Solutions’ Youth Empowerment Program, which addresses youth and police interactions around low-level offenses in the Bronx. He, along with two other teens, participated as youth leaders at Bronx Community Solutions’ Bronx Week event, on June 12, 2009.

During their internship, the participants conducted roundtable focus groups with youth and criminal justice personnel. At the event, participants shared



Michael Patterson, Paige Grant, and Mitchell Hicks together with police officers, prosecutors and public defenders

their research findings and presented recommendations to a panel of criminal justice experts, an audience of their peers, teachers and other court personnel. Paige Grant, a senior at JFK who joined the forum to gain

insight on how policy is formulated, led the panel discussion.

She explained that her experience with the police was both good and bad: “I have very strong feelings towards officers and the way they deal with youth . . . but I got such a better understanding of each players’ role in the system that serves my community. I felt like my voice and point of view was heard.” After the forum, the participants had three recommendations: To develop after-school programs for youth, to educate youth on rights and legislation, and to enhance the dialogue between youth and the police.

## New Initiatives Keep Coming

During the past 18 months, Bronx Community Solutions has continued to expand its programs and enhance the judicial response to low-level crime.

Starting in June 2008, the project assumed responsibility for coordinating all new mandated substance abuse screenings in DWI and DUI cases (see page 2).

In February of 2009, Bronx Community Solutions launched a new initiative to identify clients sentenced to alternative sanctions who may be in need of mental health treatment (see page 4).

Meanwhile, the project’s community service operations have been working creatively to contribute to the revitalization of the Bronx: tackling graffiti, assisting neighborhood

organizations, and helping revitalize business areas (see page 2-3).

In fact, the Mayor and the Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator recently announced a plan to expand Bronx Community Solutions’ approach to community service city-wide. The new project, Cleanup NYC, will begin operations in the coming months.

For regular updates about Bronx Community Solutions:  
[www.changingthecourt.blogspot.com](http://www.changingthecourt.blogspot.com)

## Offenders Rehabilitate Non-Profit's Facilities

In the summer of 2008, Mike Rustin, the director for youth and family services of Southeast Bronx Neighborhood Centers (SEBNC)'s Forest Neighborhood House, approached Bronx Community Solutions. His organization had three overgrown lots that had been the site of considerable dumping. His dream was to put them to use for gardening with mentally disabled adults. However, like so many small non-profits, his budget was tight and he was hoping Bronx Community Solutions might assist him.

Bronx Community Solutions already had some experience tackling tough projects like this (working with Mount Hope Housing Corporation back in 2007 to address severe dumping that had occurred on the site where they have now built a new community center), as well as working with Sustainable



*Judah Zuger (right) celebrating an award with staff from Southeast Bronx Neighborhood Centers.*

South Bronx and others to assist community gardens.

Crews of community service participants cleared out the garbage and now work with SEBNC to develop a garden on the site.

After SEBNC installed a new floor in their gymnasium, Bronx Community Solutions helped paint the facility and then partnered with them to host a bas-

ketball league. The league, designed to provide a forum for positive interactions between youth and law enforcement recently completed its third season with a spirited championship game between a youth team and a team of police officers from the 41st Precinct.

Recently, at an award ceremony attended by Deputy Borough President Aurelia Greene, Bronx Community Solutions was recognized for the assistance it has provided to SEBNC and the Morrisania community.

## Addressing Drunken Driving

New legislation in New York State requires that all defendants charged with a drunk driving offense be screened to determine whether substance abuse treatment is appropriate as a sentence. In June 2008, Bronx Community Solutions began helping the Court coordinate these screenings and assessments.

Once an offender is referred to Bronx Community Solutions, a caseworker conducts an intake interview and the offender is scheduled for an appointment

with a licensed treatment provider.

Between that time and the defendants' return date in court, Bronx Community Solutions tracks results, reaches out to defendants who are having difficulty completing their obligations, and prepares sentencing recommendations for the Court, usually all within two to three weeks.

Of the roughly 800 offenders who have been referred to Bronx Community Solutions,

*Continued on page 4*

## Revitalization: The Southern Boulevard BID

In the fall of 2007, Bronx Community Solutions Advisory Board Member Roberto Garcia, who is also the district manager for Community Board 2, discussed plans to form the Southern Boulevard Business Improvement District with Bronx Community Solutions staff. Bronx Community Solutions agreed to use community

service crews to assist with clean-up along the Boulevard during the start-up period of the BID. In 2008, Bronx Community Solutions started visiting the Boulevard on a regular basis to tackle litter, dumping and graffiti around the area. During this time, new businesses moved into vacant properties, including a flagship Rite-Aid store, and on December 31, 2008, Mayor Bloomberg signed a law creating

a new Southern Boulevard Business Improvement District. Once the BID was fully operational, it was able to hire its own sanitation services, allowing

Bronx Community Solutions to begin assisting with other business improvement efforts elsewhere in the borough.

A year and a half ago, Southern Boulevard was dirty. Candy wrappers. Metrocards. Burger bags. Beer bottles. Community Board 2 asked [Bronx] Community Solutions for help. . . Now the strip sparkles, and Southern Boulevard's Business Improvement District launched its own sanitation effort January 2.

-Daniel Beekman, Bronx Times-Reporter

# The Court Responds To The Problem Of Graffiti

Despite hundreds of millions of dollars in economic development and rising property values, complaints of graffiti in the Bronx have been steadily increasing for several years, costing business owners and taxpayers thousands of dollars.

In response, Bronx Community Solutions has partnered with the Bronx District Attorney and the NYPD to tackle the issue. The goal is to make sure that for cases where

an alternative sentence is appropriate, offenders perform community service that pays back the harm caused by graffiti.

**“The courts are finding a new way to give back to the community, turning punishment into production.”** -Amanda Marinaccio  
Bronx Times-Reporter

First, the District Attorney and Bronx Community Solutions work to make sure that graffiti offenders sentenced to community service are assigned to clean-up crews that work specifically to repair the damage of graffiti.

Then, Bronx Community Solutions works with NYPD Community Affairs officers in eight of 12 police precincts across the Bronx to identify sites, work with property owners to obtain permission

and conduct clean-ups. Once the crew paints over graffiti, they work with the property owner to make sure that any new graffiti is painted over right away so that the wall stays clean.

Bronx Community Solutions was recently recognized by the 44th Precinct Community Council for its graffiti response in a ceremony attended by the

Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr. and District Attorney Robert Johnson and has received extensive coverage in the local press.



*Crew Supervisor Ramon Semorile (left) and Coordinator of Community Service Moises Reyes (right) celebrating their award with Officer Carmen Lonesome of the 44th Precinct Community Affairs Division*

## Spotlight: Crew Supervisor Ramon Semorile

Each morning at 8:00 a.m., Ramon Semorile waits for a group of Bronx Community Solutions clients on 161st Street. After he takes attendance and explains the rules for the day, the men and women pile into the Bronx Community Solutions van and drive off with Ramon to a location blighted by graffiti.

As Ramon travels around the Bronx, he's always on the look out for new graffiti. He checks spots that Bronx Community Solutions has repaired to make sure they stay clean, and speaks with Community Affairs police officers to find out about graffiti clean-ups that are needed in their district.

When you speak with Ramon, his calm demeanor is obvious, which is very helpful for supervising dozens of offenders each week and completing projects all over the borough. “Many people realize that they did something wrong, and understand that they should do something to pay back. And many people really need assistance with getting their life together,” says Ramon. On many days after the crew has finished working, he'll escort a client to Bronx Community Solutions' on-site social service department for assistance with vocational training referrals, document retrieval, or drug treatment.

Each Tuesday, Ramon changes out of his painting clothes and meets with a group of clients for a Spanish-language orientation session that is part of their social service mandate. He volunteered to lead this group because he knows that many people who live in the Bronx and come through the criminal justice system do not speak English, and are not aware of the types of assistance that are available. Ramon himself was born in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to the United States. He graduated from a vocational training program at the Midtown Community Court called Times Square Ink in 2005 and

has been working at Bronx Community Solutions ever since.

After teaching his group for over a year, Ramon began to work with Care for the Homeless to expand the services to non-English speaking clients to include health information and free rapid H.I.V. testing.

Most Bronx residents may not know what he does each day, but Ramon is dedicated to improving the way the Bronx looks and helping people to get on the right track as well.

# Bronx Community Solutions Addresses Mental Health

Beginning in early 2009, a mental health screening tool was added to the intake assessment that all Bronx Community Solutions clients receive. It is used to determine which specific services might be beneficial to each individual client. The June 2008 report of the New York State and City Mental Health-Criminal Justice Panel recommended that New York City should introduce mental health screening in the Bronx Criminal Court in order to identify individuals sentenced to community-based programs who may benefit from mental health assessments, intensive engagement, and voluntary case management.

The goal of this initiative is to use the short mandatory period of engagement with services that is part of a sentence to Bronx Community Solutions to promote longer term voluntary participation in mental health services that may help the individual to not re-offend.

Every individual whose responses to the screening indicate that they may be dealing with a mental health issue is scheduled to participate in group or individual mental health counseling as part of their mandate. In some cases, if a client appears to be in crisis, they will be escorted directly to meet with a case manager at Bronx Community Solutions' on-site social service department for immediate assistance.

During this initial implementation period (February 2009-July 2009), Bronx Community Solutions identified 367 clients with current or past mental health problems. Of these 367 clients, 246 completed the mental health treatment readiness group and 138 individual counseling sessions were conducted.

Preliminary data indicates that compared to Bronx Community Solutions' clients as a whole, the individuals who are responding as possibly having mental health issues are more likely to be women, more likely to be older, less likely to be black and more

likely to be white or Hispanic, more likely to admit to substance abuse, and more likely to be currently or previously homeless.

Individual counseling sessions suggest that a majority of these clients are, in fact, suffering from co-occurring substance abuse and mental health disorders. Most clients are aware of their psychiatric diagnoses and have extensive, albeit sporadic, treatment histories. Many are unable to distinguish mental health symptoms from substance abuse problems and lump both into their "illness." The clients tend to be frustrated with the level of care they have received in the past and the accessibility of services

within the Bronx. Many have no medical insurance or have let their Medicaid lapse and lack the proper documents needed to re-apply.

The good news is that in many cases, with encouragement and assistance from Bronx Community Solutions case managers, these individuals have been able to successfully re-connect with treatment and other services. They may experience future setbacks, but in each of these cases a short alternative sentence has been successfully leveraged into a re-engagement with services, and a break from the pattern of minor arrests and short jail sentences that is common for many of these individuals.

## **Bronx Community Solutions**

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Visit [www.changingthecourt.blogspot.com](http://www.changingthecourt.blogspot.com) for success stories, project updates, and news about public policy, criminal justice and the Bronx.

## New Efforts To Screen DWI/DUI Offenders for Substance Abuse

*"Addressing Drunken Driving,"  
continued from page 2*

over 100 have been mandated by the court to complete long-term treatment for alcohol abuse. Of those who were mandated for treatment, 90 percent are in full compliance. In addition to handling the process of screening and assess-

ment for these cases, Bronx Community Solutions is working with the court and community based organizations to raise awareness and promote prevention of drunken driving and reckless driving. Bronx Community Solutions hosted about 150 seventh graders from the Bronx School for Law, Government and Justice for a Law Day

event on choices and consequences related to drunk driving. The event included a presentation by Joe McCormack (the bureau chief in the Bronx District Attorney's vehicular crimes unit), and a panel discussion with two police officers and a judge. The students participated in a "think before you drive" exercise with a theater

group, which included scenarios such as whether to get in a car with an older brother or friend. After the 7th graders finished their visit Bronx Community Solutions hosted a similar program for about 200 high school students from three local schools and the public.