



**Council Briefing
Seattle Community Court
August 5, 2008**

Philosophy

Community Courts take a different approach to chronic social, human, and legal problems that are resistant to conventional solutions by holding low-level offenders accountable and providing opportunities for them to give back to the communities impacted by their unlawful conduct.

Background

The Seattle Community Court serves “chronic public system users” – offenders who repeatedly commit low-level crimes, fail to comply with sanctions, fail to appear for court hearings, and who use jail days when they could more effectively be rehabilitated through alternative strategies. Seattle’s Community Court opened on March 3, 2005, initially addressing low level chronic offenders in the Downtown Core and Pioneer Square neighborhoods. In March of 2007, the program was expanded citywide.

Defendants are required to complete community service – typically in the areas where they committed their crimes. Community Court provides social service agency contacts with the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (public financial assistance, food stamps, & medical services), the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Treatment and Support Act (ADATSA) programs, Sound Mental Health, Veteran Administration contacts, Native American services, housing, employment, and literacy links. Defendants are required only to contact the agency to see what services or resources are available.

Program Goals

1. Hold offenders accountable to the community through community service assignments;
2. Assist offenders to make critical social service linkages to housing, chemical dependency, mental health, educational and employment services; and
3. Reduce jail utilization and recidivism.

Defendant Data

- **1,931 defendants** were scheduled for the Community Court calendar during the 34-month period (March 3, 2005 – March 31, 2008). Opt-outs, dismissed cases, and multi-jurisdictional¹ holds reduced the number of defendants who were ultimately mandated to community service and social service linkages to 1,619 (84%).

¹ On several occasions, defendants were held on another jurisdiction’s charge could not participate in the program because the lack of resolution on these additional charges did not allow release from custody; therefore these defendants were unable to perform community service or make necessary social service connections.

- 69% were male, 31% female, and the average age was 41.
- 47% of defendants were Caucasian, 30% African-American, 10% Native American, 7% Hispanic, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Other/Unknown.
- **57% of defendants were homeless.** This number is low because many of those who reported having housing had unstable, temporary housing with friends or family members. The average length of homelessness for this population is 11 years.
- **55% report chemical dependency issues;** the average duration is 11 years.
- **80% were unemployed;** the average length of unemployment is 6 years.
- 66% completed high school, GED, or some level of high school. 24% completed some level of college. The range was no formal education to Master's degree.
- Veterans comprised 9% of the defendant pool.

Violation Types

Eligible crimes include but are not limited to shoplifting, trespassing, drinking in public, urinating in public, disorderly conduct, panhandling, vandalism, loitering, and prostitution.

Jail Savings

In February 2007, the Mayor's Office of Policy and Management (OPM) completed a study of the effectiveness of Community Court on recidivism and jail use. Using the methodology that OPM developed, the Court has estimated **\$140,139 in net savings in 2006 and \$542,708 in 2007.**