



New Courts Put Non-Violent Offenders to Work Locally

A soon-to-be established community court for misdemeanors needs local organizations to provide community service opportunities for low-level, non-violent offenders.

By [Shaun Courtney](#) December 1, 2011

The D.C. Superior Court is creating new community courts to put non-violent offenders to work in the communities where they committed their crimes. The move is based on a [pilot project in the sixth and seventh police districts](#), which has demonstrated a reduction in recidivism in misdemeanor cases. Because of their caseload, the second and fourth districts will be combined; all others will have their own court.

The goal of the program is to partner offenders with resources like employment opportunities, education, job training, housing and mental health services when necessary. The offenders work off their crime in the community where they broke the law and their case is dismissed upon completion.

Judge Russell Canan told a group of neighbors gathered for the Second District Citizens Advisory Council that the new community courts would begin operating at the downtown court building in January.

"Anyone arrested come January 1st will be sent to a specific misdemeanor court," he explained.

The pilot project has been operating in the sixth and seventh districts for 10 years and a recent study by a third party showed "a substantial reduction in recidivism," according to Canan.

The benefits of the program are numerous. Canan said first the courts, police and U.S. Attorneys' Office experience a workload reduction, as they have to try fewer cases. Community organizations benefit from the thousands of hours put in by the offenders. The offenders benefit by having their slate wiped clean and gaining access to needed, though finite, resources.

"We're really the first city to take on this thing city-wide," said Canan.

Judge Truman Morrison, a 33-year veteran of the D.C. Superior Court, will serve with a team of other judges on the Second District's community court.

"It is very important to understand this has been shown to meaningfully impact recidivism...especially in urban courts," said Morrison about community courts.

He said right now the actors in the criminal justice system spend significant amounts of time and money on low-level crime, which take away from their ability to focus on the most serious crime.

The community courts, he explain, are "a way, hopefully, to free resources to be put where they are most desperately needed.

"I'm very hopeful that this will be a significant improvement in the way we do businesses with the misdemeanor cases of D.C.," said Morrison.

One community member asked the obvious and important question as to whether there were a sufficient number of resources like job training and education for all of the offenders.

"No," said Canan, "we don't have enough, but we have some."

Judge Morrison added that he hopes the new system will focus on "making sure we are delivering on and utilizing the resources we do have as effectively as we possibly can."

Marcia Davis, who works for the D.C. Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA), wanted to know who would provide monitoring and oversight of the offenders to make sure they are following through on their park of the bargain.

Canan said the courts have agreed to be responsible. "We're now going to take that part over. We're going to register folks, monitor them," he said.

"I am confident we will be able to make this work," said Morrison.

The community courts will rely on an advisory board within the respective police districts to provide feedback and address issues or concerns with the new system. Judge Canan said they are hoping to partner with groups like the CAC and Advisory Neighborhood Commissions. But, he said, the board would be open to anyone who wants to be involved.

Additionally, to make the new community court work, the courts need suggestions for organizations that could benefit from community service hours.

If you or your organization is interested in being part of the Second District Community Advisory Board or in partnering with the court for community service opportunities, contact Michael Francis, the community court coordinator.

Michael Francis: 202-879-1950, michael.francis@dcsc.gov.