



PROBLEM-SOLVING JUSTICE

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS IN YOUR PROJECT

“What we’re really doing is mobilizing the community as problem solvers.”
— Ally Krebs, Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians Tribal Court

Engaging the community is often a top priority in a problem-solving project’s early stages. Indeed, problem-solving justice is predicated on the belief that in order to solve local problems, the people who live and work in the neighborhood need to be involved in identifying issues and helping to craft solutions. In order to sustain an initiative over the long haul, it is also crucial for planners to build support among funders, social service providers, elected officials, community leaders, and the media—and the best way to develop these kinds of partnerships is to be an active and visible presence in the neighborhood.

There are a number of ways to engage the community. Below are several approaches practitioners have found successful.

THIRTEEN STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

1. Involve community members in the planning process

During the design and development of problem-solving projects, criminal justice planners typically interview key stakeholders, hold focus groups and meetings, convene a steering committee, and conduct surveys of the local community. Don’t just focus on the negative: it is important to get people talking about what they see as local resources as well as local problems and suggested responses. The goal is to inform program design and build a base of long-term support. When criminal justice officials in Liverpool, England, made site visits to problem-solving projects in New York during the planning of their community court, they brought a community member and made her a part of the process from the start.

2. Assemble a community advisory board

Community advisory boards include key stakeholders who meet regularly to discuss a variety of local problems and how they’re being resolved. Representatives can include criminal justice system players as well as representatives from the faith, business, and voluntary sectors, thereby ensuring that the project stays accountable to its local



This fact sheet was produced as part of the Community-Based Problem-Solving Criminal Justice Initiative, a project of the Bureau of Justice Assistance that aims to broaden the scope of problem-solving courts by testing their approach to wider defendant populations and applying key problem-solving principles outside of the specialized court context. The Bureau of Justice Assistance supports law enforcement, courts, corrections, treatment, victim services, technology, and prevention initiatives that strengthen the nation’s criminal justice system. The Center for Court Innovation is a non-profit think tank that works with criminal justice practitioners, community-based organizations, and ordinary citizens to develop creative responses to public safety problems, aid victims, reduce crime, and improve public confidence in justice.

This fact sheet is one in a series to support the development of problem-solving justice initiatives. For other documents in the series, please visit www.courtinnovation.org.

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COMMUNITY FORUMS IN SACRAMENTO

In Sacramento, prosecutors have used community forums to develop relationships with various ethnic communities. “We focus on individual ethnic communities that traditionally distrust the criminal justice system and don’t necessarily bring us their issues,” says District Attorney Jan Scully. “We have done that in the Muslim community, for example, the Asian Pacific Islander community, and the Slavic community.” The forums give community members an opportunity to ask questions about issues that are important to them. Scully also has a “multicultural community council” that meets regularly to help prosecutors.

community. Adding community voices is often useful as well. In Athens, Ohio, a mental health court consumer sits on the jail diversion advisory board to bring the perspective of someone who has experienced the mental health care system from the inside. This added voice helps keep the board grounded and focused on the consumers it is serving.

3 Hold community forums or open houses

Some problem-solving initiatives hold open houses to help educate the public and to brainstorm solutions to problems. These meetings are typically held in the early evening and may have open agendas or be focused on an urgent problem. South Carolina’s 4th Circuit hosts regular community forums where citizens gather to discuss public safety issues. Judges, court staff, and other government officials are available to answer questions or complaints, and talk about successes in their problem-solving initiative.

4 Gather a task force to target a specific ongoing issue

A task force or standing committee can successfully target a specific problem. The Red Hook Community Justice Center in Brooklyn, New York, has created a task force to address the problems associated with illegal dumping sites. At monthly meetings, members report new sites, track clean-ups, and come up with a strategic plan to prevent further dumping.

5 Create opportunities for volunteers

Volunteers can strengthen bonds between criminal justice agencies and the community. Community members can perform office tasks, conduct surveys, sit on community advisory boards, and act as mentors or tutors to young defendants. Some problem-solving initiatives use volunteers to identify areas in their community in need of intensive cleaning up. In San Diego, volunteers help to identify community service projects for offenders—removing litter and cleaning up schools, streets, and parks—and participate in community clean-ups.

6 Develop community accountability boards

In some community courts, members of the community are given the opportunity to sit down and talk face-to-face with low-level offenders about their conduct and its impact on the community. This approach helps bring home to offenders what’s wrong with their behavior as well as seeking their feedback about how the community can help prevent such offenses from occurring in the future. Atlanta has developed restorative boards, in which community members sit down with youthful offenders in face-to-face meetings to discuss the behavior that got the young adult in trouble and to come up with a course of action to right the wrong resulting from this behavior. The boards also meet several times with offenders to monitor their progress and help connect them to services.

7 Give presentations at public meetings and agencies

Public meetings hosted by organizations such as the police, homeowners associations, churches, and victim advocacy groups are a great place for practitioners to talk about their programs. To get community buy-in for the Pima County Juvenile

GIVING AN EFFECTIVE PRESENTATION

- Understand your audience and its needs
- Identify your message—exactly what do you want to express?
- Plan in advance; the more prepared you are, the less nervous you'll be
- Practice, practice, practice
- Share a little about yourself to help the audience connect with you
- Involve your audience in your presentation by asking questions and making your talk engaging and fun
- Use stories, metaphor, and humor
- Use visual aids (e.g., PowerPoint, videos)
- Repeat key points
- Thank your host and audience for their interest and attention

Court Center's problem-solving initiative, the lead planner gave presentations about the project's goals and objectives to 29 separate agencies—including Pima County Juvenile Probation, the Pascua Yaqui Indian Center, and the Tucson Center for Women and Children—then invited representatives from each agency to convene at the juvenile court as part of a community planning group.

8 Perform community surveys

Project staff and community volunteers can undertake annual surveys to collect information about their communities. A survey gathers information from hundreds and potentially thousands of stakeholders, giving planners and practitioners a detailed picture of a community's priorities, expectations, and self-image. And they can be relatively painless. Seattle's community court conducted a quick survey using a low-cost online survey tool (in this case, <http://www.surveymonkey.com>) to evaluate its impact on the community.

9 Train community members as mediators

Community volunteers can be trained to help resolve individual or group disputes. Because mediation is extremely flexible and can be used to address a number of problems, it is a great way to get community members to participate in the justice system. It's also a draw; conflict resolution is a concrete skill that people like and easily support. Since many courts already have mediation programs, problem-solving practitioners can often collaborate with these programs to extend their reach into the community. The Midtown Community Court has long had a community mediation program designed to help people learn the skills they need to resolve disputes in their neighborhoods.

10 Provide the community with access to services

Some problem-solving initiatives make on-site services—drug treatment, job training, and alternative education—available on a walk-in, voluntary basis. The Seattle Municipal Court has established a Court Resource Center, a one-stop center housing a variety of social services that all community members are encouraged to take advantage of, whether or not they are coming to court to address legal issues. The Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians' Tribal Court has established a drop-in center open to all young people, offering structured activities for those who might otherwise be getting into trouble.

11 Get the word out

Practitioners can use a number of methods to share information and success stories with the community, including local media, websites, newsletters, listservs, and events. By providing regular feedback to the community on problem-solving strategies, alternative sanctions, case outcomes, and other results, planners can demonstrate to residents that the community is a real partner in the project. At Bronx Community Solutions, project staff have created an online journal (or "blog"), "Changing the Court" (<http://changingthecourt.blogspot.com/>), that details the project's successes and failures and invites readers to engage in discussion.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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12 Let someone else open the door for you

To gain credibility with neighborhoods and community groups, it can be helpful to form relationships with respected community members and let them introduce you to the community at large. In Dallas, City Council members helped introduce community prosecutors at neighborhood events.

13 Invite the community to contact you

Make practitioners accessible to the community. Include contact information and/or feedback forms on websites and in brochures. The Hartford Community Court has a hotline that anyone can call to suggest a community service project for its court-supervised teams to perform. The number is printed in the court's newsletter and is announced at each community meeting court staff attend.



FURTHER READING

Changing the Court

<http://changingthecourt.blogspot.com/>

Community Focused Court Planning

http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/community/court_planning.htm

Engaging the Community: A Guide for Community Justice Planners

http://www.courtinnovation.org/_uploads/documents/Engaging%20the%20Community.pdf

Defining the Problem: Using Data to Plan a Community Court Project

http://www.courtinnovation.org/_uploads/documents/Defining%20the%20Problem.pdf

National Center for State Courts – Community Court Initiatives Resource Guide

<http://www.ncsconline.org/wc/CourTopics/ResourceGuide.asp?topic=CtComm>

Red Hook Diary: Planning a Community Court

http://www.courtinnovation.org/_uploads/documents/Red%20Hook%20Diary.pdf

Surveying Communities: A Resource for Community Justice Planners

http://www.courtinnovation.org/_uploads/documents/surveyingcommunities.pdf

There are No Victimless Crimes: Community Impact Panels at the Midtown Community Court

http://www.courtinnovation.org/_uploads/documents/No%20Victimless%20Crimes1.pdf