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The Vancouver Community Court Project



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Specialized problem-solving courts have developed rapidly in Canada in the last 5 years.

These range from courts for drug treatment, domestic violence, and mental health to the wider-ranging mandates of a “community court.”

The trend appears to have resulted in part from a realization of the human and financial cost to individuals and communities of increased incarceration (LaPrairie, 2006).

As well, the influence of the notions of harm reduction for substance abuse and restorative justice for conflicts undoubtedly have moved forward the goals of individual responsibility and have de-emphasized those of punishment and labelling (*Ibid*:2).

These courts strive to deal comprehensively with cases by responding through partnerships with treatment providers and community groups to increase effectiveness in court process, reduce recidivism, and engage the community in the solutions.

In Vancouver, problems first identified by a “Report of the Street Crime Working Group” in 2006 led to a serious consideration of justice system reforms to reduce street crime in the downtown core. Two of the primary

problems appeared to be a disconnect between the community and the criminal justice system and a lack of alternatives to traditional court-imposed sanctions that would allow more referrals before and during the court process to mental health, detox, drug treatment, and housing resources.

The trend appears to have resulted in part from a realization of the human and financial cost to individuals and communities of increased incarceration.

Thus, models of operation were studied elsewhere, in particular, at one court in the States. The Red Hook Justice Center in Red Hook, Brooklyn, serves as an impressive example of other ways of dealing with crime through a community court vision. Red Hook established a centre that drew community members into the process of decision-making about what to do with offenders.

Members of the court system here travelled to examine the Red Hook setup and a number of other community courts in the States, before proceeding to develop Vancouver’s own model.

There are three catchment areas:

- the Downtown Eastside (DTES and Strathcona);

- the Centre Business District (CBD); and
- the West End (WE).



One court, at 222 Main, will deal with the cases. The vision for the court is first to determine if the individual meets the criteria for eligibility. All summary offences committed in the catchment areas will be referred to the Downtown Community Court (DCC). Other cases may be referred at the discretion of the Crown.

All accused attending DCC will have the option of seeing a DCC lawyer or their own lawyer. Consent to being interviewed by the triage team, composed of justice and community personnel, must also be obtained.

Once the accused is determined eligible and consents to proceed in DCC, the needs of the offender can be addressed through links to community agencies or through some type of

community disposition, such as a community service order.

The following organizations will work with the community to support the Community Court problem-solving approach.

- The Provincial Judiciary
- Ministry of the Attorney General
- Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
- Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance
- Legal Services Society
- Vancouver Coastal Health
- Forensic Psychiatric Services Commission
- BC Housing
- The Public Prosecution Service of Canada
- Vancouver Police Department
- The Defence Bar
- Native Courtworkers

The perceived benefits of the court have been listed as being

- integration;
- efficiency; and
- attention to the root causes of the offender's problematic behaviour.

The integration will be among the various agencies that actually deliver services to the offenders to assure better coordination and monitoring of the use of the services.

Efficiency is defined through fewer court appearances and through the speed by which the case is finalized.

Finally, by having current information on the accused's background, criminal history, and health and social service needs, the offender will receive attention to those needs more quickly (Community Court brochure, 2007).

Individuals who will be most likely to fit the criteria for the court will be those arrested several times a year for criminal activities that affect the quality of life in the community and those that take up a lot of justice system resources. The range of offences is broad and will include

acts such as theft, breaking into cars, causing a disturbance, and assaults (CC brochure).

As Bakht has observed,

It is perhaps too early to tell how successful problem-solving courts (such as the community court) have been in transforming the way we think about courts and the results we expect them to achieve, but there is little doubt that they offer a ray of hope to ending "revolving door justice," where the same defendants are recycled through the court system again and again. (2004: 35)

This is true for the Vancouver Community Court, as well. The Criminology Research Centre in the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University looks forward to undertaking an evaluation that will assist in determining whether the court can meet that challenge.

References

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LaPrairie, C. (2005). "The Framework: The Vancouver Community Court: An Evaluation of Process and Outcomes." Original proposal submitted to the Ministry of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Public Safety and the Solicitor General, Province of British Columbia. ▲

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