

CSSD Chronicle

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Hartford Community Court Featured on WNPR

(Editor's note: A special thanks to Deborah Barrows, Community Service Program Manager at Community Partners in Action, for her contribution to this story.~LG)



In late May, the Community Service Program at Hartford Community Court was featured on WNPR's News Talk program, "Where We Live." The show's host, John Dankosky, interviewed the Honorable Raymond Norko, presiding judge at Hartford Community Court, along with Deb-

orah Barrows, Program Manager of Community Service for Community Partners

in Action (CPA), one of CSSD's program providers. The show highlighted the alternative to incarceration approach that the Community Court uses when handling "nuisance" or "quality of life" non-violent misdemeanor offenses. Examples of non-violent misdemeanor offenses include, but are not limited to panhandling, shoplifting, graffiti, breach of peace, and disorderly conduct.

Hartford Community Court, which opened in 1998, is one of only a few dozen courts across the nation that offer low-risk offenders the opportunity to perform community service in exchange for a dismissal of their case. According to Judge Norko, "who we criminalize is important," not only to an individual's future but to the future of society at large. Mandating minor offenders to perform community service offers more benefit to society than incarcerating them. It has also shown to reduce recidivism.

Judge Norko acknowledged that many defendants enter his court with mental health, housing, and substance abuse issues that may have contributed to their criminal behavior. Social

service applications, and select agency representatives, are part of the community court model and are readily available to defendants on the day their cases are heard.

Barrows is the CPA liaison with Hartford Community Court. She identifies service projects with the help of local residents and community groups. Barrows oversees five supervisors who each work with six to seven offenders at selected sites around the city. Community service projects performed by offenders include cleaning up the trails at Riverfront Recapture where residents walk and run; packaging food for the needy at the Foodshare Regional Market; and removing graffiti from public property.

During the WNPR interview, Barrows was asked about the compliance and cooperation of the defendants when they are told about the community service work. "Ninety-nine percent of the time, people are willing and able to do the job," Barrows replied. She noted that Hartford Community Court holds



individuals accountable for the harm they have caused but, “we [also] emphasize that we believe they have value. We foster a sense of responsibility; there is pride and joy associated with any volunteerism, particularly with community service.”



Another benefit of the community court model, noted Judge Norko, is that citizens and local government officials are able to see a positive result from the criminal justice system after a crime has been committed in their neighborhoods. Visible improvements to the area, performed by offenders, assures residents that the courts take the issue of nuisance crimes seriously and have ways to remedy the problem.



Based on statistics provided by the Judicial Branch, Hartford Community Court has handled over 110,000 cases from November 1998 to April 2012, producing over 374,000 hours of

community service. To put this into perspective, the dollar value of this work, based on the prevailing minimum wage at the time the community service was performed, is almost 3 million dollars.

After the interview aired on WNPR, the show’s producer, Betsy Kaplan, was interested to see the program in action. Barrows and her staff hosted Kaplan the following week in Hartford. Kaplan had the opportunity to watch a court session, meet staff, and visit various sites where community service was being performed. “She was impressed with what she saw,” said Barrows. “It was a great opportunity to show people outside of Hartford the tangible results of the program.”

For more information on the Hartford Community Court, please contact Deborah Barrows, Program Manager of Community Service for Community Partners in Action at Deborah.Barrows@jud.ct.gov



*The **CSSD Chronicle** is a regular publication of information and news about the Court Support Services Division. Questions or comments on this edition, or suggestions for future articles, can be directed to Linda.Grzeika@jud.ct.gov*