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PRACTICAL TOOLS

Engaging the Community

A Guide for Community Justice Planners

BJA

Written by

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A Guide for Community Justice Planners

“You have to go in with open ears and an open heart,” says Greg Berman of the Center for Court Innovation, who managed early planning for a community court in the Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn. “And you have to recognize that each community is different. One of the very first things that we did in Red Hook was convene a series of focus groups with neighborhood residents to identify community needs and community resources. We held separate discussions with community leaders, social service providers, young people and single moms. The conversations were extremely lively. Once people started talking, it was difficult to get them to stop.”

Introduction

This document is a guide for community justice planners seeking to build stronger links with individual communities. Community justice, boiled down to its essence, is about two things: partnerships and problem-solving. No criminal justice agency — not police, not courts, not prosecutors, not probation, not parole — can hope to build partnerships or solve neighborhood problems without investing significant time and energy in engaging the community. This paper outlines how community justice planners might begin this process, starting with the earliest stages of program development. It highlights basic tools that have worked in the past as well as some of the potential stumbling blocks that planners must confront as they reach out to residents, merchants, service providers and others.

Early Planning

Community justice initiatives are designed to build stronger connections between citizens and the justice system; community outreach is therefore a crucial component of any planning effort. Engaging the community should be the top priority in a project’s early stages — above staffing, fundraising, even program planning. There are three principal reasons for this. The first, perhaps, is obvious. If justice agencies seek to work in partnership with community members to solve local problems and strengthen a neighborhood, that partnership needs to start early. People who live and work in the neighborhood should be involved in identifying issues, setting priorities and crafting solutions. And planners must earn the trust of skeptical communities by listening attentively and demonstrating that they are there for the long haul.

A second reason for beginning the conversation with local players is that community justice initiatives, whether they originate with courts, police, prosecutors or other agencies, are designed to address the unique needs and concerns of their target neighborhoods. There is no one-size-fits-all model. Different communities have different problems. And different problems merit different responses.

The third reason for engaging the community is more pragmatic. The basic job of a planner is to organize financial, political and material resources on behalf of his or her project. This means building support among funders, social service providers, elected officials, community leaders and the media. The only way to develop these kinds of partnerships is to be an active and visible presence in the neighborhood — attending public meetings, interviewing local stakeholders and convening discussion groups.

Although community justice seeks to create safer, stronger and healthier neighborhoods, planners dare not take their community's support for granted — particularly in an era of “not-in-my-backyard” activism. Some local residents may oppose the project. Others may simply be apathetic; the challenge is to get their attention. Residents of many communities, particularly poor ones, are often deeply alienated from government and skeptical of promises made by agency bureaucrats, however sincere they seem.

Even where people are receptive, the idea of community justice is unfamiliar and will require a great deal of careful explaining. The process is unavoidably labor-intensive and time-consuming. Community relations are not built in a day and they certainly are not built by sitting in downtown office complexes. Planners should expect to spend from six months to a year building trust, making sure that they understand the community, are reflecting local concerns and that the community endorses their efforts.

In the initial stages, planners should spend time with individual residents and community groups in order to explain their ideas and hear the responses. The education is mutual: planners learn about the neighborhood — who lives there, the problems they face, what they expect from the criminal justice system, how those expectations are and are not being met, and what resources the neighborhood could provide to support a new experiment. The community learns how community justice differs from traditional approaches and how it could enhance local efforts to improve the quality of life.

As it progresses, this process can help mold priorities, determining which neighborhood issues — juvenile delinquency? landlord-tenant disputes? low-level drug dealing? — need attention first. It can also lay the foundation for partnerships with community leaders, neighborhood organizations and other public agencies already at work in the area.

Not least, the initial outreach process serves to publicize the planning effort: meetings with community groups spread the word that the project is underway. The goal is to understand the neighborhood's problems, build an agenda

endorsed by local residents and mobilize community resources well before the project actually begins.

“I learned a couple of important things from the focus groups,” Berman continues. “The first was that despite Red Hook’s reputation for drugs and serious violence, the way that local residents talked about their community was not markedly different from the way that residents of Midtown Manhattan talked about their neighborhood before the creation of the Midtown Community Court (New York’s first community court). Red Hook and Midtown are about as different as two neighborhoods can be. Midtown is the tourist and cultural center of Manhattan, the home of Broadway and Times Square. Red Hook is dominated by one of New York’s oldest public housing developments and is so isolated that I sometimes doubt whether any tourist has ever set foot in the neighborhood. Still, the same quality-of-life conditions — graffiti, littering, noise violations, loitering — weighed heavily on the minds of both Midtown and Red Hook residents. I remember one participant in the Red Hook focus groups saying, ‘Violations do not receive any priority...we need a [better] quality of life.’”

Stakeholders

Once it was called a “key person” survey; the modern term is “stakeholder.” The basic point is the same: what groups have an interest in the welfare of the community, and who speaks for them? The list of possibilities is long: local politicians, churches, schools, students and their parents, merchants, tenant and block organizations, fraternal orders, ethnic societies and other social or civic clubs, sports teams, youth groups, precinct-based police, health care clinics, drug treatment groups, literacy programs, other social service providers. There is also the less visible community — young people who aren’t in school, older people who are unemployed, welfare mothers, the elderly who stay at home. Even defendants can be included as stakeholders.

In the first phase of community engagement, planners should identify all such groups and craft strategies for reaching them. The goal is to get answers to some fairly basic questions: What do local residents think about the quality of life in their neighborhood? What are the community’s strengths? What issues are chronic problems? How do people feel about the criminal justice system? And what do they expect from it? Too often, planners presume that they understand what is going wrong in a neighborhood without asking the people who really know — the citizens who live and work there.

Community justice begins and ends with neighborhoods. Identifying and prioritizing local strengths and weaknesses is a job best left to the community. A variety of tools can be used to engage community stakeholders in this process. What follows are several strategies that have proven successful for community justice planners in the past.

Interviews

In order to gain a full understanding of a community's problems, there is no substitute for simple communication. Talking with a broad spectrum of local voices — the store owner, the senior citizen on the park bench, the teacher at school — is crucial. Planners should pay special attention to neighborhood leaders — the school principal, the block association president, the tenant organizer and the like. There may also be others with special knowledge of the community and its history: a newspaper reporter who has covered the area or a researcher at a local college. The approach to these stakeholders should be straightforward and humble: planners should emphasize that they are engaging in this process to learn about the community. This approach can go a long way towards disarming skeptical residents, who may be unaccustomed to government officials taking a deferential tone.

Possible questions include:

What do you think of your neighborhood? Is this a good place to live? To do business? To own property? What are the main sources of aggravation, of fear, of crime? Are there street conditions — rowdiness, noise, prostitution, drug dealing — that seem to be out of control? What do you think is causing them? Do the people involved in crime live in the neighborhood, or do they come here from somewhere else? How do you think these problems might be curbed? What's it like for children and teenagers here? What do you think of the schools? Are too many children and teenagers on the street when they should be in school? Are there things for kids to do after school and on weekends? Is there a problem with gangs?

What resources exist in the neighborhood already? What are the community's strengths? Which churches, social service providers and community groups are the most respected? What do people in the neighborhood think about the way the police patrol the community? About the way defendants are prosecuted? About how probation and parole work? About the way the court system handles crime, family matters and housing disputes?

These questions get the conversation going; more specific ones depend on what planners may already know or suspect about community life. Planners should try not to bring too many preconceived notions to the conversations, however. Be open to surprises. In one case, community prosecution organizers went into a neighborhood armed with reams of statistics about drugs, violence and other serious crime, only to be told by community members that stray dogs were their most vexing problem. Taking these issues seriously and devising strategies to address them will do much to win community support.

In addition to helping planners identify neighborhood concerns and priorities, individual interviews can be an effective tool for gauging local politics. Ask interviewees who else should be consulted in the same way. At this stage it should be possible to learn who plays the most important leadership roles in the community: who is respected, who is pursuing what hidden agenda, what factions have formed and what issues divide them.

“Red Hook residents had problems that took them to Family Court and Civil Court as well as Criminal Court,” Berman says. “These included disputes with landlords and domestic violence cases. Several participants lamented the jurisdictional boundaries of New York’s court system. One person said, ‘You can’t divide a person up. You have to have a comprehensive look at the whole person. The community court could do that.’”

Focus Groups

The idea here is to get input from people who are not necessarily leaders: people who reside or work in the community, who raise children there, own or rent property, use its streets, its schools, its parks. Why is this important? While community justice planners must respect the authority, experience and knowledge of the “official” leaders of their community (ministers, politicians, tenant leaders), they must also make sure that this leadership accurately reflects the opinions and concerns of their constituents. To do this, planners should assemble several groups of about 10 people each (fewer than that may not yield many different views; more may become unwieldy to manage) and meet with them for an hour or two.

Some sessions can be easily organized through formal channels: ask a local minister to invite a dozen parishioners to a conversation at the church or the head of the P.T.A. to assemble a group of school parents. Planners can also try to organize some discussions less formally. Does someone have a friend of a friend who lives in the neighborhood? Ask her to invite several neighbors over for an evening of conversation. Does the man who runs the corner store seem especially interested in talking about the community when you stop in? Ask him to invite a number of merchants from around the neighborhood to come in and talk on a Sunday afternoon.

Like the individual interviews, these “focus groups” or “discussion sessions” should begin with a basic explanation of the project and questions about the neighborhood. Again, the approach is to ask for help: How do neighbors feel about community problems? What are the neighborhood’s strengths and weaknesses? Has the neighborhood gotten better or worse in recent years? Do they have confidence in local law enforcement and the courts?

Successful meetings of this sort require careful preparation. It’s important to choose the right setting and to create a relaxed atmosphere — serving simple refreshments goes a long way towards helping people feel welcome and comfortable. Planners also need to think about how to keep the meeting under control. Group dynamics can be tricky: given an audience, some people may be tempted to make speeches or engage in personal attacks. Planners lacking experience with the process should consider hiring a professional facilitator.

“Red Hook is a neighborhood with a deep skepticism about government initiatives,” Berman observes, “a skepticism that is rooted in a history of government neglect and unwanted intervention. This attitude would prove to be

our largest obstacle. We got off to a good start in overcoming it with the focus groups. Almost by accident, we had sent a powerful message to Red Hook residents by convening the focus groups. And that message was: your voice counts. The focus groups were a visible sign that we intended to consult the community at each step of the process. This was not lost on participants.”

Neighborhood Meetings

In addition to convening their own meetings, planners should respect the existing infrastructure of the neighborhood by appearing at regular sessions of community groups: the P.T.A., the block association, the tenants’ organization, the community board. Here the approach needs to be a bit more formal: begin with a five to 10 minute talk about the idea of the community justice initiative, where it came from and who supports it. This introduction could also explain how community justice is working in other places, the problems it has addressed and the ways that community justice efforts incorporate input from neighborhood residents.

Following the talk, planners should invite questions from the audience and lead a discussion of how the generic concept of community justice should be adapted to this particular neighborhood. Sometimes, the best way to engage an audience in a conversation about justice is to role play. For example, community court planners in New York have asked local residents to play the role of the judge, presenting them with a couple of hypothetical cases drawn from real life. What would they do if they were sitting on the bench and were confronted by a recidivist prostitute with a history of abuse at the hands of her boyfriend/pimp? How would they handle a homeless defendant arrested for trespassing at a local bus terminal? What would be an effective sentence in these cases? The community court planners explained to participants the kinds of information about a defendant that a typical judge would have. They also told them how long a judge would have to render a decision.

For community members to step into a new pair of shoes — whether it be those of a judge, prosecutor, police officer or probation officer — can be an eye-opening experience. In addition to helping them understand the pressures and demands of working in the criminal justice system, this exercise can also help residents develop a more nuanced response to crime, forcing them to grapple with the types of underlying problems — substance abuse, homelessness, unemployment — that often lead an offender to crime.

Outreach to Government Agencies

Talking with residents should not be the end of the conversation, however. Planners should also reach out to government agencies, both those within the justice system and those whose work intersects with the system (welfare, foster care, education, public housing and others). Neighborhood problems like juvenile delinquency or quality-of-life crime cut across institutional boundaries, involving dozens of government players in one way or another. Any response to these problems should be equally multi-faceted.

When reaching out to government agencies, the questions to ask are slightly different: How is government currently responding to the neighborhood's problems? In a more perfect world, what could the criminal justice system be doing better? The point of these conversations is twofold: to get a clear picture of “business as usual” and to tap into the creative energies of the people who know the system best.

Planners should take pains to understand their audience: it makes sense to emphasize different elements of the project to different listeners. For example, meetings with the local health department might focus on social services, emphasizing the needs of criminal justice populations. Meetings with board of education officials might concentrate on ways that law enforcement currently handles juveniles as well as on crime and disorder — rowdiness, noise, drug dealing, thefts, mugging of students going to and from school — that disrupt the school day.

Even if community policing already exists in your jurisdiction, don't forget to reach out to the police. Meetings with police might emphasize ways that courts, prosecutors, and probation and parole officers can complement community patrol initiatives. For example, a community court can facilitate the quick sanctioning of offenders arrested in sweeps and providing of social services that remove prostitutes, substance abusers and the homeless from the streets. The court's community service program might help police by painting over graffiti, reclaiming neglected parks and refurbishing other run-down locations that attract prostitutes and drug dealers. Police might also be interested in discussing a community court's capacity to provide them with access to court outcomes, something they often do not receive from the traditional court system. Since police are inevitably the criminal justice agency that is most visible and active in the life of a neighborhood, planners should consider paying special attention to its officers at this early stage — accompanying them on patrol, sharing lunch or dinner, hanging out with them after hours in order to get to know them and learn from their insight into the community and its problems.

The bottom line is partnership. The goal of meeting with police officers, health officials, educators, welfare specialists and others is to bring them into the fold, engaging their expertise and manpower to solve neighborhood problems. The importance of building personal connections with their representatives cannot be overstated.

Planners often assume that other agencies will want to “do the right thing” and participate in a community justice effort simply because it is a good idea. This is not always the case. Agencies are like people: they do things for a variety of reasons, some altruistic, some not. Planners should be prepared to articulate how their community justice project will benefit other agencies, furthering their mission as well as the project's. In some cases, the payoff for partners may be increased public visibility. In other cases, it may be access to information or the potential for new funding opportunities.

Early Achievements Interviews, focus groups and public meetings are valuable tools that can help planners gain a detailed understanding of the community and develop a sense of connection with those who live and work there. Planners may have to go further, however, if they want to build legitimacy.

The simplest way to develop credibility is to deliver something tangible to the neighborhood. Promises often ring hollow when they are not backed by action. So the quicker that planners can make good on some of the ideas that have emerged during the course of their meetings, the better. In many cases, this may mean that planners have to launch an activity related to public safety before their project itself is ready to open its doors.

Have residents identified a local park as a hot spot for criminal activity? Perhaps planners could organize a “take back our park” night of speeches and resident patrols. Are local kids idle during the summer months? Perhaps a baseball league is the answer. Is low-level youth crime on the rise? Perhaps a peer court could be created to address the problem.

It almost does not matter what the early achievement is, so long as it is real and responds directly to neighborhood concerns.

Roles and Responsibilities

Community justice initiatives raise provocative questions about the roles and responsibilities of communities and criminal justice agencies in combatting crime, addressing quality-of-life issues and strengthening neighborhoods.

Beyond identifying and setting local priorities, what role should community members play in program development? What are the pitfalls when communities and criminal justice agencies work in tandem to implement the program?

As is often the case in community justice, different projects offer different answers. Some define the community’s role quite narrowly, while others engage neighborhood partners at every step of the way. There’s no right or wrong answer, but community justice planners must decide early on what their approach will be.

In many cases, planners feel tremendous pressure to create a community advisory board for their projects. Sometimes this pressure is internal: planners think that an advisory board will help them manage community relations. In other cases, the pressure comes from the community itself, which demands a formal acknowledgment of its role in the process. Whether driven by internal or external forces, an advisory board makes good sense. By convening one, planners send a strong message that they intend to hold themselves accountable to the neighborhood.

The primary issue with advisory boards is not whether to have one, but when. The timing of a community advisory board must be weighed very carefully. In many cases, a community advisory board may make more sense after a project is operational, when there are actual accomplishments to review and report. No matter what stage an advisory board is assembled, one thing is certain: its role must

be clearly defined. In what areas do planners seek community input? What elements of the program are not up for debate? Try to be as honest as possible. Very few community residents will expect to run the show. Most will respect boundaries as long as they are rational and clearly articulated.

But advisory boards are just one mechanism to guarantee community involvement over the long haul. Whether it's community impact panels at the Midtown Community Court or Reparative Probation boards in Vermont, or Community Justice Councils in Denver which involve community members in long range strategic planning for their neighborhoods, the point is the same: to engage the institutional strengths of a community — schools, churches, families — in addressing local needs. Community justice, in other words, seeks to test the extent to which government and communities can work together to build safer, stronger neighborhoods.

Concept Paper

At the end of the community outreach process, planners should draft a report that summarizes what they have learned from their meetings in the community. It might include a general description of the neighborhood followed by the relevant problems that residents have identified. It would then discuss ways the criminal justice system might respond in cooperation with other local institutions.

The concept paper should be both a planning document that summarizes work to date and a fundraising tool that can be used to approach foundations, corporations, elected officials and other potential funders. In drafting the document, planners should take pains to underline community “buy-in.” Has a local city councilman publicly endorsed the project? Is there a letter of support from the police department? Has the local newspaper written a favorable op-ed piece? All of these indicators of support should be incorporated into the concept paper. The idea here is to let readers know that the project will be accepted as a valued addition to community life rather than the local outpost of an alien criminal justice process.

“What I learned from all of these encounters was that there is no substitute for face time,” Berman concludes. “As the months passed, I found my connections with com-munity leaders deepening. I met their children, attended their church services and shared meals with them. I saw them in good times and bad, at public gatherings and in more intimate settings. These ties would serve the community court well when it was necessary to mobilize neighborhood support for a grant proposal, a newspaper article or a public meeting.”

Conclusion

Engaging the community requires time and energy; it also requires tact and imagination. Introducing a new initiative into any political and social environment requires a deep understanding of that environment and an ability to adapt to it in constructive ways. Planners have to understand how the

community works — who enjoys power and respect, how factions form, who can bring them together — and how to maintain neutrality. No community justice project can be identified as “belonging” to one group or another. This may not be easy: a neighborhood is smaller than a city, but its politics are not necessarily less complex. A failure to understand them early on could put the whole plan at risk. Each project and each community have to work out their own relationship. The earlier planners start, the better it will be.

Notes

Notes

Center for Court Innovation

The winner of an Innovations in American Government Award from the Ford Foundation and Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, the Center for Court Innovation is a unique public-private partnership that promotes new thinking about how courts can solve difficult problems like addiction, quality-of-life crime, domestic violence and child neglect. The Center functions as the New York State Unified Court System's independent research and development arm, creating demonstration projects that test new approaches to problems that have resisted conventional solutions. The Center's problem-solving courts include the nation's first community court (Midtown Community Court), as well as drug courts, domestic violence courts, youth courts, family treatment courts and others.

Nationally, the Center disseminates the lessons learned from its experiments in New York, helping courts across the country launch their own problem-solving innovations. The Center contributes to the national conversation about justice by convening roundtable conversations that bring together leading academics and practitioners and by contributing to policy and professional journals. The Center also provides hands-on technical assistance, advising court and criminal justice planners throughout the country about program and technology design.

For more information, call 212 397 3050 or e-mail info@courtinnovation.org.

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