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# Red Hook Diary

Planning a Community Court

BJA

*Written by*

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#### **About the Author**

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# Planning a Community Court

## Introduction

How does a community court move from concept to implementation? What strategies have proven successful at winning over skeptical neighborhoods? Is it possible to sell the idea of a community court to funders who have not traditionally supported court innovation?

The diary that follows charts how one community court planner negotiated some of the challenges of early planning, including community needs assessment, fundraising and program design. It tells the story of the initial days of the Red Hook Community Justice Center, a neighborhood-based court in southwest Brooklyn. This diary offers lessons from a crucial moment in its development — the first stages of planning from 1994 to 1996. For updates on the Red Hook Community Justice Center, which officially opened in early 2000, please log on to [www.communityjustice.org](http://www.communityjustice.org).

## How Did I Get Here?

I remember the first time I ever heard of Red Hook. It was 1991. Against my better judgement, I was dragged by a couple of friends to one of those movie theatres that plays only artsy and independent films. The film that was showing that day was called "Straight Out of Brooklyn." At the time, I thought it was the most depressing movie I had ever seen. It depicted the struggles of a young man living in the Red Hook housing project and dealing with an extremely dysfunctional family. I don't recall much of the plot, but I do remember that it ended with gunshots and heartache.

So three years later, when I got a call from John Feinblatt, the director of the Center for Court Innovation, asking if I was interested in planning a community court for Red Hook, I reacted with no small amount of trepidation. For me, like many New Yorkers, Red Hook conjured up images of a neighborhood under siege, a community that epitomized urban blight and disorder.

While I mulled over John's offer, I went out to spend some time in the neighborhood. I had expected to see a desolate ghost town, but it didn't take long for me to realize that there was more to Red Hook than its reputation suggested. I visited Red Hook on a beautiful summer day. I walked through Coffey Park, the central neighborhood park, and saw families enjoying the afternoon sun. I toured Red Hook's waterfront, with its spectacular views of the Statue of Liberty and lower Manhattan. I saw visible signs of economic development — a warehouse had been refurbished and an art gallery and small waterfront museum

were in the works. Finally, I met a couple of people, most notably Monsignor John Waldron, the parish priest of the local Catholic church, who talked enthusiastically about the neighborhood's rich history and its recent progress in improving the quality of life. By the end of the day, I was sold. I took the job and began what has been one of the most fascinating experiences of my professional life.

### **Why Red Hook?**

This was a question that was answered before I arrived on the scene. In 1992, Patrick Daly, a local school principal, was accidentally murdered in a drug-related shoot-out. In the months following his death, Brooklyn District Attorney Charles J. Hynes told the local media that Red Hook would be an ideal location for a community court. D.A. Hynes' remarks started the ball rolling. There were other factors that made Red Hook an attractive site. Most important was the neighborhood's isolation — it is one of the few communities in New York with easily identifiable borders. You know when you're in the neighborhood and you know when you're not. In a well-defined community like Red Hook, it is easier for a demonstration project like a community court to have a concentrated impact. It is also simpler for researchers to measure that impact.

By the middle of 1994, the District Attorney's Office and the Center for Court Innovation had agreed that it was worth exploring the feasibility of a community court in Red Hook. The next question was how to proceed. The two offices decided to go in together on a joint funding application. Their first target was the New York City Housing Authority. This made perfect sense: after all, more than 70 percent of Red Hook's residents live in public housing, so the Housing Authority is naturally one of the largest stakeholders in the community. The proposal was successful; it was this grant that enabled the Center for Court Innovation to hire me as the lead planner in the summer of 1994.

### **Defining the Problem**

One of the very first things that happened after I accepted the job was a series of focus groups with Red Hook residents. The Brooklyn District Attorney's Office helped put the groups together, bringing in an outside consultant to facilitate the conversations. We held separate discussions with community leaders, social service providers, young people and single moms. Red Hook is small enough — it has less than 11,000 residents — that we were able to get just about all of the major players in the neighborhood to come, as well as reach beneath them to talk directly with their constituents. More than 50 people attended the groups, which were held at the Red Hook Public Library. Participants were asked a series of fairly simple questions: What are the major problems in Red Hook? How might a neighborhood court help address them? What should be the court's priorities? The conversations were extremely lively. I remember that once people started talking it was difficult to get them to stop — several of the groups ran well over their allotted times.

I learned a couple of important things from the focus groups. 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 in focus groups held before the creation of the Midtown Community Court several years earlier. Quality-of-life conditions — graffiti, littering, noise violations, loitering — weighed heavily on the minds of those who participated in the focus groups. I remember one participant saying, “Violations do not receive any priority. ... We need a [better] quality of life. Even the schools are not safe.” Another expressed the feelings of many when he said: “The court system has failed us. ... [Offenders] go through revolving doors.”

But low-level offending was not the only thing on the minds of the focus group participants. Red Hook residents had problems that took them to Family Court and Civil Court as well as Criminal Court. These included disputes with landlords, small claims cases and domestic violence issues. 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.” Comments like this one confirmed our initial hunch that a community court in a neighborhood like Red Hook should be multi-jurisdictional, that it should attempt to address the full range of legal issues faced by local residents, not just criminal matters.

Finally, participants in the focus groups urged the court to be as aggressive as possible in providing social services. One recommended that the court look at “the total picture — spousal abuse, victim services, teenagers, mentor programs, mock court, parenting skills.” From comments like these, we began to fashion a notion that the court should provide services not just to defendants, as the Midtown Community Court does, but to everyone who is touched by crime in Red Hook — defendants, victims and those in the community who are simply concerned about public safety. It was not long after the focus groups that we decided to call the project a “community justice center” instead of a community court. We thought that “community justice center” better signified our intention to build much more than just a courtroom in Red Hook.

## **Engaging the Community**

The focus groups were productive sessions, unearthing a treasure trove of valuable data about community attitudes and expectations. At the same time, they were a useful tool for building neighborhood support, as I discovered in the days that followed. Red Hook is a neighborhood with a deep skepticism about government initiatives, a skepticism that is rooted in a history of government neglect and unwanted intervention. Many Red Hook residents feel that their community is home to a disproportionate number of undesirable government projects. They point to the neighborhood’s methadone clinic and waste transfer station as prime examples. They also feel that their neighborhood’s character was forever changed for the worse by Robert Moses, the master builder of New York, who essentially cut the neighborhood off from the rest of Brooklyn when he constructed the elevated Gowanus Parkway in the 1940’s.

Given this history, it is fair to say that many Red Hookers are hesitant about ambitious new government initiatives, no matter how good they sound on paper. In attempting to win community support for the Justice Center, 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.

Over the next several months, I met individually with every stakeholder that I could think of: business owners, clergy, tenant leaders, elected officials, police officers, Housing Authority administrators, local social service providers and others. As an outsider to the community, I took pains to emphasize that I was there to learn from them, that my job was to help translate their concerns and their ideas into concrete programs. In general, people were generous with their time and grateful to be asked about their opinion.

I also went to as many public meetings in Red Hook as possible. At some, I spoke about the Justice Center. At others, I went just to listen. This sent the message that I wasn't coming to the community as a carpetbagger, that I was interested in more than just selling a bill of goods.

What I learned from all of these encounters was that there is no substitute for face time. In other words, it is impossible to build meaningful relationships without investing significant time and energy. As the months passed, I found my connections with community leaders deepening. I met their children, attended their church services, wrote them letters of recommendation, ate dinner with them, and supported several of their neighborhood charity efforts. These ties would serve the Justice Center well when it was necessary to mobilize neighborhood support for a grant proposal, a newspaper article or a public meeting.

To my surprise, my outreach efforts revealed very few concerns about the Justice Center. The issues that I did hear were less about the concept than about the process: Who would direct the Justice Center once it opened? What were we doing about jobs for neighborhood residents? Would the Justice Center have a community advisory board?

Given these concerns, we decided to create a formal vehicle for community input. For the last 30 years, New York City has had a network of 59 "community boards" that are responsible for advising the city's administration about land-use and other neighborhood issues. Several dozen community representatives sit on each board. Early on, Community Board 6 in Brooklyn, which includes Red Hook, agreed to convene a special task force devoted to the Justice Center. Throughout the planning process, this task force functioned as a de facto advisory board for the project. They convened public meetings about the project every three months or so. These sessions were a valuable opportunity for community residents to stay informed about the Justice Center and for us to keep our fingers on the pulse of the neighborhood.

## **Building Partnerships**

I was not alone in trying to build community support for the Justice Center; from the start, I enjoyed the active partnership of the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office. The D.A.'s early endorsement lent the project immediate credibility and opened many doors that might otherwise have remained closed.

I think it is important to note that the partnership with the D.A.'s Office was not a make-believe or paper partnership, but a real-world relationship fraught with real-world tensions and conflicts. Although we shared a common goal — creating a neighborhood justice center — we both had our own organizational agendas and pressures outside of Red Hook. Inter-agency collaboration takes patience, but in my experience it is well worth the effort. The D.A.'s Office helped enrich the planning process, bringing additional resources — and a different institutional perspective — to the table.

While the relationship with the D.A.'s Office was the most intimate, it was by no means the only partnership that was forged in the early days of the project. Another crucial partner was Victim Services, New York's largest victim assistance agency, which runs programs throughout the city's neighborhoods, including Red Hook. (Victim Services changed its name to Safe Horizon in 2000).

Bringing Victim Services into the planning process made perfect sense. After all, a door-to-door survey of neighborhood residents had revealed high levels of fear — over 42 percent felt unsafe in their lobbies, over 52 percent felt unsafe in their apartment building stairways, and 69 percent felt unsafe at their local subway. In this environment, a community justice center would have to be aggressive about providing victims with assistance and giving them a voice in the justice process. Victim Services was instrumental in helping us identify and think through these issues.

## **Red Hook Public Safety Corps**

The most visible sign of our partnership with the D.A.'s Office and Victim Services is a joint project launched in the fall of 1995. The Red Hook Public Safety Corps is a community service program that puts 50 local residents to work on crime prevention and victim assistance projects. In many respects, the Public Safety Corps embodies the values of the Justice Center: it seeks to provide an under-served neighborhood with the tools it needs to address disorder and improve public safety.

The Public Safety Corps grew out of a desire to find aggressive and creative ways to solve community problems in Red Hook. Like the Midtown Community Court, the Red Hook Community Justice Center is built on the principle that courts can do more than just respond to crime after it occurs. This means engaging in activities like reaching out to victims, cleaning up local eyesores and fixing broken windows. But to get this kind of work done requires manpower — manpower that most courts simply do not have.

Luckily, we found a vehicle capable of providing us with the resources we needed: AmeriCorps, a national service program that provides participants with a small living allowance and an educational award of about \$5,000 in return for a

year's worth of community service work. In 1995, in collaboration with the D.A.'s Office and Victim Services, we applied for an AmeriCorps grant, requesting funding to support 50 national service volunteers (and four staff members) in Red Hook.

AmeriCorps turned out to be a perfect fit. The AmeriCorps grant enabled us to establish an ongoing presence in the neighborhood. I was able to use the grant as leverage with the New York City Housing Authority, which donated a ground floor apartment in the Red Hook housing project to serve as the home base of the Red Hook Public Safety Corps. Each day from this headquarters, Corps members fan out across the neighborhood, performing community service at local schools, health clinics, police precincts, and senior centers.

In spirit, the Public Safety Corps is somewhere between summer camp and boot camp. Our Corps members are bursting with energy and ideas. The challenge is to channel their enthusiasm in productive directions. The easiest way to do this has been to give Corps members a role in creating their own service projects. In the process, Corps members have pushed the program in some unexpected directions. For example, one member put together a weekend baseball league to keep young people off of the streets. Some observers may fairly question whether running a youth baseball league is an appropriate activity for a court. But this type of engagement with the neighborhood is at the heart of the Red Hook enterprise and is entirely consistent with the Justice Center's commitment to improving the local quality of life.

The Public Safety Corps is unique in a couple of other respects as well. Unlike many AmeriCorps programs, which parachute volunteers from Ivy League colleges into poor communities, our Corps members are recruited from Red Hook and surrounding neighborhoods. In the program's first year, more than 75 percent of the members were residents of Red Hook's public housing project. In addition, the Public Safety Corps is an inter-generational Corps, with participants ranging in age from 18 to 68. Most AmeriCorps programs are geared toward young people, particularly recent college graduates. Given Red Hook's high rate of unemployment, it came as little surprise that residents of all ages applied to participate in the Public Safety Corps.

Over the last couple of years, the program has had a major impact on its participants. The Corps has succeeded in offering its members — many of whom receive public assistance — a chance to broaden their horizons and learn meaningful work skills. Phone surveys with program graduates revealed that two out of three have gone on to full-time employment and/or higher education. I'm proud to say that many have taken jobs in the public interest sector, including several who have gone on to work at the Center for Court Innovation.

More importantly, the members of the Public Safety Corps have made a visible difference in Red Hook. (By 2001, Red Hook Public Safety Corps members had contributed more than 350,000 hours of service to the community. This includes conducting over 2,500 safety inspections in the Red Hook housing proj-

ect and assisting over 10,000 children in class-rooms, after-school programs and summer activities). The Corps is now an integral force in the neighborhood. Community leaders in particular have come to see the Corps as a valuable tool, calling on members to help them in implementing pet projects like community gardens, after-school tutoring and tenant patrols.

## Developing the Site

Beyond its intrinsic value to the community, the Public Safety Corps served another important purpose: it kept talk of the Justice Center alive during some of the project's lengthy dry spells, when progress was slow. There were two principal reasons for these dry periods: problems with the proposed location of the Justice Center and the challenge of raising capital funds. As time went on, these two issues became inextricably connected.

Finding a location for a new project is almost always a tricky business, particularly in a city like New York, where real estate is an extremely precious — and political — commodity. Thankfully, Red Hook offered one major advantage in this regard. Because of the dramatic population and business flight out of the neighborhood over the preceding 25 years, Red Hook has a number of vacant and abandoned properties. After investigating all of the city-owned sites in the neighborhood — and inspecting several privately-held properties as well — eight sites emerged as viable options. Each was close to public transportation and each was large enough to house both a courtroom and social service programs.

In an effort to narrow the list further, we organized a bus tour for local community leaders from the Community Board 6 task force. After looking at all of the possibilities, their clear first choice was Visitation School, a vacant parochial school that had closed its doors in the 1970's.

Visitation struck their fancy for several reasons. First, it was located in between “the front” and “the back.” In Red Hook parlance, “the front” signifies the public housing project. “The back” is the area closer to the waterfront, which is composed of single-family row houses that are occupied primarily by Italian and Irish Americans. Visitation, in effect, is situated in neutral territory — it “belongs” to neither the front nor the back. This is an important political consideration in Red Hook.

On an emotional level, many residents were drawn to Visitation because it had once been an important community resource. They looked at the Justice Center as an opportunity to bring back to life a magnificent old building. And magnificent is precisely the word to describe it: built at the turn of the century, Visitation School has the kind of dignified street presence that you might expect from a neighborhood courthouse. And, as it turned out, Catholic Charities, which owned the building, was willing to lease it and play an active role in making the project happen. End of story, right? Wrong.

Visitation was not without its drawbacks. Although the structure itself was in good shape, the interior was a disaster. Asbestos and lead paint were major prob-

lems. The roof needed to be replaced. None of the windows were worth saving. It took several months to investigate the building properly — conducting tests, analyzing results, meeting with engineers and construction managers, preparing preliminary architectural drawings. After all was said and done, we got the bad news: it would cost several million dollars to renovate the building.

## Fundraising

Many good ideas founder on the shoals of poor fundraising. No program, no matter how well-intentioned or creative, can survive without adequate resources. I won't lie about this: raising money for the Justice Center was not easy. There were days, even months, when I thought that the project would wither on the vine as we waited for grant proposals to be reviewed.

In addition to the New York City Housing Authority, initial seed money for the Justice Center had been provided by a couple of local foundations — the Schubert Foundation, the Fund for the City of New York and the Scherman Foundation. While this was enough to keep me employed, it was not nearly enough to support a multi-million dollar renovation project. The question quickly became: where do we find that kind of dough?

The answer came at the end of 1996. After several months of conversations, site visits and proposal writing, we received a grant from the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Assistance to pay for the soft costs associated with renovating the Visitation School — primarily fees for architects, engineers and renovation managers. With this money in hand, we were able to make a much stronger case to the mayor's office here in New York. Red Hook all of a sudden had attracted the interest of the federal government, which had shown its commitment to the project by making a two-year, \$1.2 million grant. Would the city step up to the plate as well?

This decision was made at the highest possible levels: New York State Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye and New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani were personally involved in the conversations. Finally, after more than two years of reaching out to the community, building the concept and developing the site, in December of 1996 the city announced that it would cover the full cost of renovating Visitation. The next phase of planning the Justice Center was ready to begin.

## Conclusion

A groundbreaking ceremony for the Red Hook Community Justice Center was held in front of Visitation School in the summer of 1998. Several hundred local residents watched as Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye, District Attorney Charles J. Hynes and other dignitaries shoveled the first ceremonial pile of dirt. Before construction could begin, the project had to pass a rigorous community review process that included the local community board, the Brooklyn Borough President and the City Planning Commission. Thanks to the groundwork that had been performed during early planning, the Justice Center passed each stage of review without objection. After less than two years of construction, the Justice Center officially opened in early 2000.

### **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](mailto:info@courtinnovation.org).**

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