

Bronx Community Solutions 2006 Annual Report

It's been two years since Bronx Community Solutions began operations in the Bronx County Criminal Division.

In that time, we've accomplished a great deal: providing judges and court players with a wide array of social service options; creating meaningful court-ordered community service projects; increasing accountability with community-based mandates; and bringing community members, law enforcement and service providers together to jointly address problems like graffiti and disorder.

The following are some highlights from the past year.

Continued Growth

In 2006, we've shown that it's possible to "go to scale" with a problem-solving approach to low-level offending in a centralized court setting.

It's a story that can be told in numbers. In 2006, close to one-quarter of all misdemeanor offenders arrested in the Bronx ended up in Bronx Community Solutions – a total of over 10,500 judicial mandates and a 60 percent increase in caseload over the previous year. Bronx Community Solutions participants completed 70,000 hours of community service worth \$450,000 to the Bronx community, painting over graffiti, cleaning step streets and helping to maintain local parks. Participants attended over 700 social service classes taught by Bronx Community Solutions clinical staff and partner agencies, and close to 1,300 accepted a voluntary referral after completing their mandates, seeking help finding a job or making an appointment at a drug treatment facility. Best of all, these outcomes were achieved without sacrificing program quality: compliance with court orders continues to average 70 percent, a significant improvement on most urban courts.

In addition, Bronx Community Solutions expanded into Family Court, assuming responsibility for the Juvenile Accountability Court, a project that provides an alternative to state placement for young people charged with delinquency (see below for more details).

Strengthened Core Operations

In 2006, Bronx Community Solutions was organized into four departments, including court operations, intake, clinical services, and planning. Each unit has clear lines of authority and responsibility, and each can take credit for significant accomplishments:

- By creating a training system and rotation for staff members from other departments, court operations (headed by Danielle Stockweather) has expanded into weekend arraignments and the warrant part (where cases involving individuals who have failed to complete a Bronx Community Solutions mandate are heard), as well as night

arraignments on a part-time basis. The clinic's expansion into the warrant part has proven to be particularly significant: by providing reliable information about participant compliance, and making a consistent set of recommendations regarding the rescheduling of mandates, Bronx Community Solutions has helped strengthen the court's ability to hold low-level offenders accountable, giving judges more confidence that these sentences are serious and that there are swift consequences for non-compliance.

- The intake office (headed by Benjamin Smith) continues to perform at a high level, conducting close to 75 client contacts a day in a space that holds only eight to 10 individuals at a time. Despite this high volume (and tight space), staff members are trained to treat each Bronx Community Solutions participant with dignity and respect, helping to set a tone for the entire project. The advent of a paperless intake system has helped make the process more efficient and has reduced the potential for errors.
- The social service clinic (headed by Maria Almonte-Weston) has expanded to include a number of new social service options and partner agencies to the mix, including classes on anger management, decision-making and youth marijuana use. The clinic's focus on employment, in partnership with Federated Employment and Guidance Services (which has assigned a full-time staff member to Bronx Community Solutions), Urban Youth Alliance and the Center for Employment Opportunities, among others, has paid huge dividends: over 1,000 participants accepted an employment referral in 2006. All told, over 10 percent of Bronx Community Solutions participants accepted a voluntary referral, more than double the rate reported by similar projects and a sign of the clinic's ability to engage clients.
- Finally, planner Kate Krontiris and community initiatives coordinator T.K. Singleton head up the planning office, which has made significant inroads in planning new community service projects and reaching out to local residents to create partnerships to better respond to quality-of-life concerns stemming from crime and disorder (see below for more detail).

Community Engagement

Beginning in April 2006, Bronx Community Solutions convened a 25-member community advisory board. Meeting quarterly at the Bronx School of Law, Government, and Justice, the Board is composed of representatives from the court, prosecutors, the defense bar, city agencies, local service providers, the police, educators, clergy, business leaders, and concerned citizens. The advisory board serves the interests of both Bronx Community Solutions and the community: the project learns about community concerns while community members have the chance to discuss neighborhood crime with attorneys, judges, and administrators.

Already, several concrete projects have emerged from the Community Advisory Board:

- In consultation with the Bronx Borough President’s Office, Bronx Community Solutions conducted a survey of “step streets” across the Bronx. Step streets, pedestrian walkways connecting parts of the street grid in hilly sections of the borough, are often physically neglected and viewed as unsafe by local residents. In response, Bronx Community Solutions sends out a community service crew to clean-up selected step streets.
- Bronx Community Solutions has spearheaded an effort to improve court-ordered community service. Each week, our crews paint over the graffiti-covered walls of local businesses, civic institutions, and nonprofit organizations. In collaboration with the New York City Police Department and local residents, crews are sent to areas that have been identified as particular eyesores. If a wall we’ve painted gets tagged again, the Bronx Community Solutions crew keeps coming back until vandals give up. In another community-service venture, supervised offenders prepare supplies for distribution to local charities at the Bronx-based warehouse of World Vision, an international aid organization focused on children and families. Community service crews also help maintain the riverbanks of the Bronx River, working with the local Bronx River Alliance.
- Starting in December 2006, we began convening community impact panels to address youth marijuana use. The panels help young people understand why such behavior is not only self-destructive but also damaging to the community. At the community impact panels, community stakeholders and young people charged with marijuana offenses come together to engage in an honest and free-flowing exchange about how these offenses affect the community and its residents.

Bronx Community Solutions staff members also attend community meetings throughout the Bronx. The goal is to show that the court system is a responsible member of the community. At the same time, through attendance at these meetings, Bronx Community Solutions staff members learn about the problems facing communities, establish broader community contacts, and identify potential partnerships to help address community concerns. Currently, staff members attend eight community board and five police precinct meetings monthly.

A New Focus on Youth

Close to 40 percent of Bronx Community Solutions participants are between the ages of 16 and 24, but until recently the project lacked dedicated social service or community service programming for young people. Recognizing that young adults are developmentally different from older adults, Bronx Community Solutions has created a new set of services for young people, including:

- Three new social service options, including a youth life skills group designed to discuss topics such as peer pressure, stress, structure and authority. The youth marijuana group engages young people in a structured group conversation about

the impact of marijuana use/abuse, giving participants the chance to make a rational decision to discontinue use on their own. Finally, clinical staff members offer individual counseling, designed to explore specific personal challenges confronting younger program participants.

- A young adult basketball league for individuals who have completed their Bronx Community Solutions mandates. The league meets bi-weekly at the Mullaly Park Recreation Center. Ex-offenders compete against teams from neighborhood community centers, the New York City Housing Authority, the New York City Police Department, the Department of Corrections and the courts. Team members take trips together as well, to museums and performances, and are encouraged to access educational and vocational services. It's a form of positive reinforcement for Bronx Community Solutions graduates and other at-risk young adults. It's also a form of probation: team members know they have to stay out of trouble and continue to advance their educational and career goals or they won't be allowed to participate.

In addition, in fall 2006, Bronx Community Solutions assumed responsibility for the Juvenile Accountability Court, an alternative-to-out-of-home-placement project for young people charged with delinquency in Family Court. Working with the New York City Department of Probation, Bronx Community Solutions offers a rich new set of community service and social service options, responding to requests made by judges and other Family Court stakeholders.

These services include an innovative community service project that combines academic and theater workshops provided by a local arts group, along with community improvement projects, focused on the theme of "conflict resolution." Conflict-related offenses (such as getting into a fight at school) are the most frequent type of offense for which teens in the Juvenile Accountability Court have been arrested. In addition to the community service project, Bronx Community Solutions also plans to introduce new social services, such as a youth marijuana group for juvenile probationers, that seek to address some of the underlying issues that bring young people into court in the first place—and to aggressively recruit additional community-based services to work with young people and their families.

Looking to 2007

Although 2006 has been a busy year, we have an ambitious agenda planned for 2007, including strengthening our community engagement efforts and providing new services to judges.

- **Community Engagement.** In 2007, Bronx Community Solutions plans to expand its community outreach efforts, creating a "Judge for Yourself" event that will bring together community members and judges to discuss the courts' response to low-level criminal offending. The idea is to provide a forum for discussion and exchange between local residents and the judiciary. Experience indicates that community members appreciate the opportunity to share their views with judges and that judges benefit when

they understand the community context in which crime occurs. The Bronx Borough President's Office has agreed to co-sponsor "Judge for Yourself" during Bronx Week. This will help generate publicity and exposure for the event.

- **New Services.** Bronx Community Solutions will introduce several new sentencing options in 2007. The "repeat offender program" offers enhanced supervision and additional services (such as a group examining barriers to compliance) to Bronx Community Solutions participants who have failed the program in the past but are still eligible for a community-based mandate. We also plan to create a six-session group addressing the issue of prostitution for older women who are currently not eligible for the Girls Educational and Mentoring Services program because of age but are still eligible for community-based services. Finally, project staff members are creating youth-specific community service projects – such as working at a soup kitchen or painting over graffiti – that will meet on Saturdays to accommodate school schedules.

One challenge for Bronx Community Solutions has been identifying appropriate candidates for longer-term community-based mandates, such as inpatient drug treatment or employment counseling. In 2007, we will be working closely with the misdemeanor mental health and drug courts in the Bronx to identify defendants who do not meet their eligibility criteria yet need longer-term services.

Telling a Story

While Bronx Community Solutions is busy changing the way business is done in the Bronx, the work we're doing also has an impact far outside New York City. Bronx Community Solutions has been selected by the U.S. Department of Justice as one of ten demonstration sites across the country that will test the idea of problem solving justice on a broad scale. Developments in the Bronx are also being watched abroad. Over the past year, Philip Bowen, a member of the policy branch of Britain's Home Office, which is responsible for setting criminal justice policy across England and Wales, was assigned to Bronx Community Solutions while he studied problem-solving innovations here in New York. Phil brought first hand knowledge of problem-solving justice in the Bronx back to Britain, where two Community Justice Centres have recently opened based on the New York City model, and the national government has announced plans to implement problem-solving court initiatives throughout the country.

To help tell the story of project implementation, in March 2006 Bronx Community launched a web-based diary (or "blog"), called "Changing the Court." The blog is updated regularly and has attracted over 17,000 visits from across the country and over the world.

The following are excerpts from the blog that provide examples of the impact of Bronx Community Solutions on individual defendants and local residents. Take the example of Francisco, who describes what Bronx Community Solutions meant to him, in his own words:

I was smoking marijuana pretty heavily. Then I got arrested. I remember a sergeant in Central Booking who told me that even though things seemed bad right now, I could turn it into something positive if I was willing to try.

When my case came before the Judge, he told me that he would grant me an ACD [an Adjournment in Contemplation of Dismissal, in which all charges are dismissed after six months or a year if the defendant stays out of trouble] if I would go to Bronx Community Solutions for five days of social service classes and counseling.

I remember meeting Robert, Saudi, Ramon, and Tony on my first day at Bronx Community Solutions. They were a great example for me: they gave me high hopes, helped me to recognize my mistakes, and had good advice. Special Terry, a health educator from the City Department of Health, visited to teach one of our classes, and after class she helped me to reactivate my Medicaid and get a copy of my Birth Certificate.

When I got arrested I was out of work and out of school. The people I met at Bronx Community Solutions helped inspire me to do something with my life and right now I'm attending my second semester at the College of New Rochelle. I stop by Bronx Community Solutions a lot just to say hello because of the respect and friendship that I get there. A lot of people give up hope and think they can't change, but it's been a year since I smoked marijuana.

The impact of Bronx Community Solutions is also evident on local residents. Take Tawana Joye, who runs the New Friendly Day Care Center in the East Tremont section of the South Bronx. The front of Ms. Joye's building had been defaced by vandals, and she had contacted her local community affairs police officer in hopes of having the graffiti removed. The police contacted Bronx Community Solutions. We met Ms. Joye the day our community service crew came to paint over the graffiti. She was so grateful for the work that she invited our crew to take a tour of the facility, and she began regularly attending our community advisory board meetings. When the day care center was defaced again, she called us directly, and our crew was able to repaint the wall within a few days. Ms. Joye says the graffiti removal work makes her children feel safer and gives her confidence that the courts are looking out for her community.

It's been an exciting year for Bronx Community Solutions. A year ago, we could not have predicted such dramatic growth for the project, and we are proud of all that we have been able to accomplish. We expect that 2007 will be even more productive and exciting a year as this one has been.