

Brownsville Community Justice Center

Currently in planning, the Brownsville Community Justice Center seeks to reduce crime and the use of incarceration in Brownsville while at the same restoring local faith in the justice system.

Overview

The Justice Center is dedicated to building multiple off-ramps for local residents who come into contact with the justice system. The Justice Center will provide much-needed educational, occupational, social, and health services at nearly every stage of the justice process, from arrest to prosecution to sentencing to aftercare. No matter how someone encounters the Justice Center – whether it’s a case diverted from prosecution or a mandate from a judge or an individual returning from incarceration – the goal is the same: to provide the kind of services and support that individuals need to become law-abiding members of society. Special effort will be made to address the needs of crossover youth – young people simultaneously at risk of involvement in the child welfare and juvenile and criminal justice systems. In performing this work, the Brownsville Community Justice Center will build on the track record of community courts in Red Hook, Midtown Manhattan, Harlem, and the Bronx that have been documented to reduce local crime, enhance public confidence in government, and reduce the use of jail sentences.

The Challenge

Located in central Brooklyn, Brownsville has not experienced the same public safety gains that the rest of New York City has enjoyed over the past 20 years. A recent *New York Times* story about the neighborhood was headlined “Where Optimism Feels Out of Reach.”

Brownsville has the highest concentration of public housing of any neighborhood in the country, with more than 18 different developments. In recent years, it has also

earned the distinction of being the most violent neighborhood in the city as well as the neighborhood with the most stop-and-frisk encounters.

To establish a baseline for future evaluation efforts, researchers from the Center for Court Innovation conducted a neighborhood survey, asking over 800 community members about crime and other topics. More than 70 percent of local residents said that guns are a big problem in the neighborhood. And only 21 percent reported that the court system was effective in dealing with crime in the community.

The Idea

Responding to these conditions, the Brownsville Community Justice Center will be a neighborhood-based court that will work with a variety of justice system-involved populations. The focus will be on individuals with low-level criminal and family court cases, as well as probationers, parolees, and others referred by schools, police community-based and civic organizations. Individuals reporting to the court will appear before a full-time judge dedicated to the Justice Center and will have the opportunity to be connected with a broad array of co-located agencies and community-based services, including drug treatment, job training, and counseling. These services will also be available to local residents on a walk-in basis. The idea is to link community members to the services and supports they need to avoid future criminality and involvement in the justice system.

Current Projects

The Brownsville Community Justice Center has already begun to implement programs to enhance the quality of life in the community.

Resources: Supported by an in-house clinic of social workers and case managers, the Justice Center provides judges in Kings County Criminal Court with a broad range of alternative sentencing options, including short-term social services, community restitution, psycho-educational groups sessions, and more intensive, longer-term clinical interventions for young offenders age 13-24 living or arrested in Brownsville. Clinic staff also receive referrals from the Department of Probation, Crossroads juvenile detention facility, the Office of Children and Family Services, and community-based organizations.

Probation: The New York City Department of Probation has a team of probation officers in Brownsville as part of the Neighborhood Opportunity Network (NeON) initiative. As part of this effort, the Brownsville Community Justice Center is working to connect men and women between the ages of 16 to 24 who have been in contact with the criminal justice system in the last 12 months to resources such as GED and college assistance, internships, and professional training. In addition, participants complete community benefit projects, including several large-scale mural projects and assisting with the construction of a community teaching garden.

Youth Court: The Brownsville Youth Court trains young people to hear actual cases involving their peers, such as assault, truancy, graffiti, and fare evasion. Instead of going through the traditional justice system, young people appear before the youth court where they are given sanctions meant to repair the harm their actions caused and are linked to local services to help them avoid further contact with the justice system. Each year, the youth court handles more than 100 cases and trains more than 60 young people. More than 90 percent of the participants complete their sanctions – community restitution, letters of apology, links to social services – as ordered.

Fighting Gun Crime: With support from the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance and the New York State Division

of Criminal Justice Services, the Brownsville Community Justice Center is working to combat gun and gang violence in Brownsville with the Brownsville Anti-Violence Project. Through a series of monthly “call-in” forums, the Anti-Violence Project brings together recently released parolees, law enforcement, justice agency representatives and key community players to send a message that violence is not acceptable. Additionally, the Anti-Violence Project, with the guidance of a youth and community advisory board, has launched a public education campaign that challenges destructive norms and behaviors that contribute to gun and gang violence in the community.

Learning Lab: The learning lab is an on-site computer room developed in partnership with the New York City Police Department to address a pressing need for educational support and workforce development amongst young people in Brownsville. The lab offers drop-in and scheduled programming to help participants improve their reading and writing abilities, critical thinking, and other skills.

Community Service: Supervised work crews are repairing conditions of disorder in Brownsville. Projects include park clean-ups, graffiti removal, and responses to other neighborhood eyesores that are reported by community residents – maintaining Pitkin Avenue, cleaning up Betsy Head Park, and working at community gardens.

Partners

The Brownsville Community Justice Center has been endorsed by New York State Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman, in addition to local partners such as the Brownsville Partnership, Community Partnership Commission Association, SCO Family Services, the Brownsville Recreation Center, and the Brooklyn Clergy Task Force. Support for planning and programming has come from a number of federal, state, and local agencies, including City of New York, the U.S. Department of Justice, the New York State Unified Court System and several private funders.