

Community Service at the Midtown Community Court

The Midtown Community Court was created in 1993 to focus on low-level crime in and around Times Square in Manhattan. The nation's first community court, it offers innovative responses to quality-of-life offenses, such as prostitution, illegal vending, graffiti, shoplifting, farebeating and vandalism, developing meaningful sanctions that seek to improve the lives of victims, defendants and members of the community.

Part of the Midtown Community Court's mission is to experiment with sentences that pay back the neighborhood through community restitution projects and social services that address the problems that underlie criminal behavior. The court serves as a model and resource for the justice system, inspiring replications both locally and nationally. In 2015, 78 percent of defendants sentenced to community service complied with their mandates and completed over 24,824 hours of community service—the equivalent of \$179,974 of labor—as they repaired conditions of disorder in the surrounding neighborhood.

Community Service Options

A hallmark of the Midtown Community Court's approach to low-level offenses is creating meaningful and visible community service opportunities, developed in partnership with local residents, businesses, and police, that respond to the community's needs. By developing a range of community service options, the court tries to ensure that all defendants can fulfill their obligations.

Defendants who require a low level of supervision complete their mandates at community partner agencies, under the direction of the partner agency's staff. For example, with the help of Times Square Alliance and the Lincoln Square Business Improvement District, defendants help clean the

streets and paint street furniture. Defendants also assist at social service organizations such as Encore and Goddard Riverside Community Center preparing meals for senior citizens.

Defendants requiring a medium level of supervision complete community restitution under the supervision of Midtown Community Court staff, maintaining the courthouse, as well as painting over graffiti, removing litter, and other clean-up activities in the neighborhood.

Defendants in need of a high level of supervision or those with disabilities work in a bulk mailing initiative in the courthouse, where they prepare mailings for local non-profit organizations.

How It Works

Screening

An intake counselor meets with all defendants to administer a short screening instrument. The goal is to choose the most appropriate community service option, factoring in the defendant's work schedule, criminal history, substance use, mental health, and skills. If the defendant needs additional services, such as mental health counseling, drug treatment, employment training, or veterans' services, staff can make referrals to on- and off-site providers. Staff also engages clients to build rapport and encourage compliance.

Immediacy

In an effort to improve compliance, defendants sentenced to community service frequently complete their mandates within 24 to 48 hours. Participants often join community service projects at the court immediately after sentencing, which facilitates successful completion and helps participants avoid being returned on a warrant for non-compliance.

Visibility

Defendants complete highly visible community service projects, such as sweeping streets, painting over graffiti, planting tree pits, and cleaning parks. Visible community service projects increase public trust in justice and offer local residents the opportunity to see the impact of the Midtown Community Court's work.

Restorative Justice

Community service is a way for participants to offer restitution for the harm they have caused through their criminal behavior. The Midtown Community Court regularly solicits feedback from businesses, residents, police officers, and social service agencies about potential community service needs. The Midtown Community Court's approach is designed to restore both the community and to re-integrate participants back into the community. For example, youth may complete their service at organizations such as Groundswell, a non-profit organization dedicated to creating opportunities for young people to engage in public art projects.

For More Information

Visit: <http://www.courtinnovation.org/project/midtown-community-court>

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