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New York State Unified Court System

Street Outreach Services

A Partnership Between Police and the
Midtown Community Court

BJA

Written by

David Anderson
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A Partnership Between Police and Midtown Community Court Social Workers to help People Living on the Streets

Introduction

High street lamps cast a ghostly light across the 3 a.m. sidewalk — cool now, before another steaming summer day — and on the two old men seated on a piece of cardboard. They are wide awake but warily still as the police van rolls up nearby and three men get out.

Two are police officers in something like a uniform: blue polo shirts, Bermuda shorts, guns concealed in belly packs. The third wears a dark green tee-shirt bearing big white initials: SOS. As they approach, one of the cops begins to talk: “Hi, there. How are you doing?”

The men respond with stares.

“I’m not here to bother you tonight,” the cop continues. “I just wanted to introduce my friend Dave, here” — he indicates the man in the green shirt — “he’s from the Midtown Community Court, and he wants to tell you about some of the services they offer.”

Dave picks up his cue: “How are you feeling tonight? These guys are cops and I’m a street worker from the court. You know the court? It’s at 54th and Eighth Avenue. We can help you with housing or employment, get you into detox … now we’ve even got a medical clinic with nurses from N.Y.U.”

He keeps up the well-rehearsed patter until he senses a glimmer of response in one man’s eyes. The police fade back as Dave squats down to talk. The subject of his attention, who looks clean, neatly dressed and relatively sober, begins to answer his questions, speaking slowly and clearly. He says he is 69 years old and a veteran of the Korean war.

“A veteran?” says Dave. “Why don’t you get your benefits? You could get money. You could get an apartment instead of being out here at three o’clock in the morning.

“Aw, I’ve been down there too often,” the man responds. “They just give me a runaround.”

“I don’t do that,” Dave responds. “We kick ass and take names later. We know how to get things done for you.”

Eventually, the man agrees to give Dave his name and social security number, then takes a business card.

“You come up tomorrow afternoon,” Dave says. “I’ll be there. We’ll see what we can do.”

“Well,” the man says slowly, “I just might.”

An Improbable Marriage

Dave Connolly walks the streets for cases at all hours of the day and night, always accompanied by police, as part of a growing experiment based at New York City's Midtown Community Court. Known as Street Outreach Services, or SOS, the project provokes new ideas about the role of courts and about creative new uses for police patrol.

The idea of marrying social work to law enforcement may strike some as improbable, if not unwise, yet it arose logically from the Midtown Community Court's mission to be a community resource, beyond just dealing with criminal cases. The Court, which opened in 1993 next door to the Midtown North precinct, arraigns low-level offenders arrested in the area and sentences those guilty to community service, substance abuse treatment and other social services.

Offenders begin serving such sentences on the spot as they are organized into supervised crews that perform odd jobs around the courthouse or for nonprofit groups in the neighborhood. They may also attend classes while awaiting placement in drug detox programs or consult with social workers to deal with the problems that led them into trouble with the law. The Court devotes its entire sixth floor to such casework, a medical clinic and conference rooms for group and individual counseling sessions.

Inevitably, the Court's influence began to be felt next door among the police officers assigned to Midtown North's community patrol unit. These officers knew well enough that the charges filed against most people arrested for shoplifting, turnstile jumping and prostitution reflected the least of their problems. Too often, police were arresting the same people again and again for the same offenses. The cops understood more than anyone the importance of helping such offenders confront the real issues: substance abuse, homelessness, mental illness or sexual exploitation.

A New Experiment

"We began to wonder if a fuller partnership was possible," explains John Feinblatt, who heads the Center for Court Innovation, the agency responsible for creating and administering the Midtown Community Court. The idea was to go beyond crime prevention with "more aggressive activity to meet the problem where it is and intervene."

"We see our Court as being a problem solver first and foremost," says Julius Lang, the Court's coordinator. "Why should we wait until our defendants come into the courtroom and get arraigned? You can't predict what kid in New Jersey is going to shoplift in Macy's, and you can't predict what guy is going to patronize a prostitute. [But] you can predict that some people out on the street might be arrested and be in the Court sooner or later — prostitutes, people using drugs, people with mental illness. So why should we wait?"

However logical it seems to Feinblatt and Lang, that's a radical idea. While probation and parole officers have traditionally sought to blend the roles of social worker and cop (not always comfortably), the concept remains foreign to police, at least as a matter of official policy. Even the most liberal interpreters of community policing are likely to have a hard time justifying a role for police that does not involve either enforcing the law or taking direct steps to prevent crime, like getting a landlord to secure a vacant lot. The police officer that helps a family get a youngster into drug

treatment or counsels a prostitute to return to her parents in the Midwest usually acts ad hoc, and on the basis of personal sympathy and inclination rather than professional training or orders from above.

The idea of police patrolling with counselors also appears to raise a civil liberties issue. Isn't the presence of a police officer at the counselor's elbow inherently coercive, even if the officer says nothing? The same officer, after all, might show up later to arrest the homeless drunk who earlier refused an offer of help. How much pressure can, or should, be put on troubled people to get help for which they don't see a need?

A Precedent

Despite these questions, Feinblatt and others at the Court were aware of an important and positive precedent. Back in the 1970's, the Vera Institute of Justice had developed a similar program of outreach to Bowery vagrants. Previously, police had dealt with denizens of skid row by loading them into paddy wagons and hauling them to court, where they would spend the night in a detention pen, plead guilty to loitering or disorderly conduct, then return to the street the next day to await the next police sweep. This process, which accounted for 40 percent of all arrests in New York City, did little more than "pollute the court," recalls Herb Sturz, then head of Vera.

He decided to challenge the conventional wisdom that street people would not come in for help voluntarily. He rented a Hertz car and toured the Bowery in the company of a flophouse manager, a nurse from St. Vincent's hospital and a police officer whose only role was to provide security. The group would approach vagrants and offer to take them for treatment immediately. To everyone's surprise, about three quarters of all those approached accepted transportation to an infirmary for a few days of drying out and consultations with social workers. "The idea was to treat people with decency and get them out of the criminal justice system," Sturz recalls. The experiment, which attracted nationwide attention, succeeded in reducing arrests of street addicts and eventually developed into Project Renewal, a substance abuse treatment program that continues today.

To be sure, the problems of Bowery street people in the 70's, however serious, were less complicated than those of the crack and heroin addicts, homeless, mentally ill and prostitutes who became a familiar presence on the streets of Midtown Manhattan in the 80's and 90's. But Sturz and Feinblatt continue to challenge the assumption that troubled people won't come voluntarily for help if given the chance and a bit of encouragement.

The results so far are promising. The pairing of cops and counselors alters the mindset of police used to looking at street addicts, drunks, prostitutes and the homeless as targets for quality-of-life enforcement rather than people in need of help. SOS case workers consider the police an invaluable asset for outreach well beyond simply providing for their safety on the streets. Most important, in its first year SOS outreach teams persuaded 264 people to come in for help. They include addicts placed in detox programs, prostitutes helped to escape "the life," homeless people moved into shelters or permanent housing, veterans signed up for Federal benefits, the jobless placed with local employers or sent off to work and live at a Catskills resort.

All represent people who, but for SOS, might have been arrested or would still be on the street.

On the Street

Before going out to work, two SOS workers from the Court, David Bedrin and Esther Rosario, break bread with today's two cops from Midtown North at a coffee shop near the precinct station. When talk turns to Clinton Park, a chronic homeless campsite, Officer Frank Conroy speaks up.

"I'm not going to go out and talk to them in Clinton Park," he says. He's spent a lot of time in his enforcement role throwing people out of the park. How is he now supposed to offer them help? "I might aggravate the whole situation," he worries. Rather than stick around for outreach, people who see him are likely to flee.

"You're going to have to learn to deal with them on both levels," responds Doug Delillo, an experienced SOS officer. "When I first started doing this, I was exactly the way you are. ... They know it's your job. [You say] 'Look, I'm here to help you. If you don't want to be helped, I'm going to enforce what I have to enforce.'"

Conroy remains hesitant, but an hour later, when the van pulls into Clinton Park, he decides to get out. A number of the people spread out on park benches appear to recognize him, and as he goes through the routine with Bedrin and Rosario, they keep an eye on him. But no one gets up to leave.

Retail Selling, Contact by Contact

SOS began with Connolly, an experienced substance abuse counselor whose job at the Court had been to evaluate offenders and refer them for placement in detox and drug treatment programs. In the pilot phase of SOS, he started going out on the street with Kenneth Ryan, a talented community patrol officer from the precinct station next door. As people they contacted began to show up on the sixth floor, it soon became clear that there was too much work for a single person. The Court obtained a \$200,000 grant from the Open Society Institute to expand the program as a formal part of the Community Court. Lang hired David Bedrin and eventually brought in Esther Rosario, who had counseled battered women in police precinct stations. Connolly, Bedrin and Rosario divide their time between searching for clients on the street, working with them when they come to the sixth floor for help, and keeping detailed records of everything they do so that the experiment can be properly evaluated.

On the street, the job amounts to sales at the most retail level, contact by contact. SOS workers and cops identify likely prospects, approach them, introduce themselves and start talking. They describe services available at the Court, explain where it is and when it's open, and emphasize that everything is totally voluntary and free of charge. They distribute business cards bearing their names and phone numbers at the courthouse. During the predawn patrols with prostitutes, they hand out condoms as well.

Their overtures sometimes draw outright hostility:

"Leave me alone," shouts a young blonde woman as the team approaches the piece of sidewalk she has claimed with her sleeping bag.

"We're not here to bother you," explains a police officer.

"You are bothering me," the woman responds, as she gathers up her belongings, then walks away.

"Why are you speaking to me?" asks a gaudily attired person approached on Eighth Avenue in the wee hours of a Friday morning. "I'm not a prostitute. I'm a performer. I'm a drag queen at one of the best clubs in the city."

"In that case, God bless you!" Connolly exclaims.

Most people are more receptive, willingly accepting outreach workers' business cards, allowing them to record their names and social security numbers, sometimes even begin the process of counseling on the street. "You don't understand," whines a grizzled man sitting with his drinking buddies on plastic milk crates. "I'm an alcoholic." He already reeks of drink at eleven in the morning.

"So am I," says Connolly, who is in recovery himself.

"But I feel like I need to take a drink every day," the man complains.

"So do I," says Connolly. "So do I. But I can get you into detox. Look, you take this card. It has my number on it. You know how to find me when you're ready to come in." The man pockets the card as Connolly writes down his name.

In an alcove under the West Side Highway, the SOS team comes upon a pile of trash surrounding a long cardboard box that once contained a refrigerator. A cop knocks on the box and after a minute or two, a Hispanic woman climbs out of it. She appears to be in her late twenties, with a soft, doughy face and disheveled brown hair. Since she speaks much more Spanish than English, the team turns her over to Rosario.

As the two engage in a lengthy conversation, Rosario learns that the woman has children in foster care and a man with whom she shares the box. They would like to go to a shelter rather than sleep in a box, she says, but they haven't found one that will take them as an unmarried couple. As they talk, Rosario eyes the woman's neck, which is purpled with large bruises. Eventually the man emerges from the box, bare-chested and bleary-eyed, but he does not have much to say to anyone.

Back in the van, Rosario is working up the case: "I notice the hickeys on her neck," she says. "Are they using condoms? Is she pregnant or could she get pregnant? And what about this guy? A lot of women think they're nobody without a man — they need a man to survive. So they go from one toxic man to the next instead of getting themselves together." The Hispanic woman had seemed appreciative of her talk with Rosario, and she took a card, but there is no certainty that she will come in, and no way to compel her to do so. Outreach can't really do more than advertise the Court: like direct mail marketers or door-to-door salespeople, the outreach workers have to keep making contacts in hopes that a certain percentage eventually will respond.

New Strategies

When Connolly approaches a large man sitting on a bench in Bryant Park, his whole life piled up beside him in a cart filched from the Post Office, the man makes it clear that he's not interested in help. He's enjoying the park and the sunshine, and in his head at least, everything is under control. But Connolly persists, brandishing a sheaf of business cards.

"Take these," he says. "I know you don't want to come up to the Court now, but

I'm sure you meet plenty of people out here who will. You're in a position to help me out."

The man takes the cards and agrees to lend a hand to the outreach effort. It's a familiar marketing ploy (get a friend to subscribe and receive your next issue free!) and it apparently works. Many who come into the SOS office have heard about services available through the Court from other street people rather than a direct contact with an outreach worker. More than once, working prostitutes known to the team have sent over younger women they fear are being destroyed by the exploitative life.

The SOS workers also accept that outreach has to be a continuing process, that it may take many contacts — even many experiences with treatment and relapse — before a person will accept help. "You have to give some people a little room," Connolly says of the man in Bryant Park. "Let me tell you something. When I go back and speak to him again, the whole response is going to be different. I've empowered him to make decisions when I give him a few cards and say, 'Look, somebody runs into you with a problem, give me a call.'"

Several blocks to the south in Greeley Square, where dozens of homeless people doze or socialize on a sunny morning, Connolly passes by several strangers to strike up a conversation with a woman he recognizes as a former client, one who came through because of an arrest. "Hi, Dave," she says, "I remember you."

They talk about the Court and he explains the new program to her, then asks her how she's been. The conversation goes on longer than it might, given that she already knows about the Court herself. Then Connolly tells the police officers it's time to leave. When they ask why, given the wealth of prospects in the park, Connolly explains: "They're asking her right now, 'Who are they?' So she's demystifying the whole thing, telling them about the services, about the different things she's received. When I come back again, somebody else that needs something is going to approach me. It's not like I'm trying to sweat them for information. They'll be looking for information from me, and that's what I want."

On the Street

The woman on the park bench is very drunk. Sitting next to a guy with a beer in a bag, she sways slowly back and forth and her eyes twirl around like little pinwheels when she tries to focus them. Rosario decides to approach her anyway. "How're you doing, sweetheart?" she says, launching into her spiel about the Court.

The woman stops swaying and regards the person in the green tee shirt with skepticism. "What you going to do for me?" The edge in her voice is pure alcohol.

"Oh, all kinds of things," Rosario says. "Get you into detox, help you find a job, a place to live." She thrusts the card toward the woman, who examines it closely.

Now the man next to her speaks up. "No use trying to help her," he says. "She's just a hopeless drunk." He raises his can of beer with a nasty chuckle.

The woman crumples up Rosario's card, and her twirly eyes find their focus as she lets loose with a stream of obscenities directed at the SOS team. Back in the van, Rosario mulls over the incident. "I saw glimpses of her trying to connect....

She was receptive until he started instigating. ... Maybe it would have worked if he weren't there, but how are we going to get him away?"

"Hey, you should have told me," Officer Delillo says. "The beer in the bag was a clear violation right there. I could have told him and removed him."

The angry confrontation, in other words, was a missed opportunity for the blending of law enforcement and social work, the team realized. But there could be others.

Partnership

The outreach workers worry about their relationships with police officers as well as those with clients. Although Police Commissioner Howard Safir and the rest of the brass expressed their support for SOS, endorsements from the top may well be diluted by the time they filter down through the precinct command. "Simply having it decreed from the mountaintop isn't enough," says Lang, Midtown's coordinator.

The New York City Police Department remains committed to the "broken windows" idea — that aggressive policing of low-level offenses and disorderly street conditions goes a long way towards preventing more serious crime. While a precinct's community patrol officers are supposed to get to know the people who inhabit their beats, including the drunks, addicts, prostitutes and homeless mentally ill, their focus remains on using law enforcement to help protect the quality of life.

On routine patrol, cops are supposed to arrest people found with open containers of beer or booze, demand identification and check for outstanding arrest warrants. And they regularly conduct "sweeps" — descending in force to roust the homeless from sidewalk encampments and tear down their makeshift shelters for sanitation trucks to cart away. Some police officers assumed SOS would become part of these operations; they didn't like it when the Court explained that SOS isn't about arrests and sweeps.

Overcoming Skepticism

In the early days, there were police officers who tended to stay in the van while the outreach workers did all of the interacting with people on the street. Despite his initial favorable experience with Ryan, Connolly recalls, "I didn't get the same gung-ho attitude from other officers."

Some were openly skeptical. "They'd say, 'Who are you? This isn't my job.'" But Connolly persisted. "I would say, 'Fine, let's just hang out together,'" hoping to earn their respect. He well remembers the day the outreach van witnessed a hit-and-run accident. "The officer said to me, 'Dave, get out of the car and make sure the woman is all right' while he took off and caught the perpetrator." At that point, Connolly figured, he had finally won respect.

In time, officers in the two precincts began to come around. They did so partly because of the personal schmoozing but more because they saw the program beginning to show results — finding constructive ways to remove from the streets people the police had written off as nothing but trouble.

"When we first started doing this," says Officer Paul Peck, "we would just drive the van. We were like a taxi service because we didn't know. Finally, Dave Connolly

began saying, ‘This is what you’re supposed to do. . . .’”

At first, “I was more into the enforcement,” observes Delillo. “But now it’s changed. I’m trying to learn more ways to help them. When I’m doing regular patrol, and I come across a homeless problem, I’m not just looking to chase them away. I refer them to the Court or to other places where they can get help.”

The police have also come to appreciate the Court’s willingness to assess clients’ needs and find meaningful placements for them. Previously, all they could do was direct the people they were rousting from their camps to the nearest city-run shelter. Now officers who have worked with SOS have begun carrying SOS business cards when on regular patrol. “It’s much easier to refer them to the Court because the Court has more places to refer them to,” Peck says. “If you send them to the shelter, that’s only helping them for the time being. The Court is an unusual resource,” he says.

Sergeant Michael Wynne, who leads the community patrol unit at Midtown South, says he tries to get all the officers in the unit involved in the outreach patrols for their benefit as well as the benefit of the homeless. “I think its important for all my people in community policing to know about this,” he says. In addition to broadening their attitudes towards the homeless, it puts them in touch with services available from the Court. “I was unaware of all this until I got involved with SOS.”

In addition to social services for the homeless, addicts and prostitutes, he says, he learned of the Court’s willingness to provide work crews of community service sentenced offenders to clean up graffiti and perform other tasks that mesh with the community policing agenda.

Obstacles

Despite the progress, some problems remain. A police officer’s success at outreach depends not only on motivation but personality and general aptitude for chatting up the homeless on the street. Some are much better at it than others. Yet police supervisors may transfer community patrol officers who have spent weeks or months building up a rapport with street people.

Another debate concerns uniforms, an issue the two precincts have approached in opposite ways. In Midtown North, the officers began patrolling in full uniform, but soon decided they looked too intimidating for outreach. “We found out that we didn’t get a good response from the people we’re trying to deal with” when in full uniform, Delillo says. “There’s definitely a difference. I guess they get so used to guys in uniform just chasing them away, moving them or arresting them . . . that they just don’t want to deal with you.” Now they do outreach in plainclothes.

In Midtown South, officers going out with the SOS workers started off in plainclothes but police supervisors objected; they believed that cops on such an assignment should be identifiable as cops. The officers worked out a compromise: instead of full uniforms, they wear the polo shirts and shorts of cops who patrol on bicycles, and they keep their guns out of sight, in belly packs or under their shirts.

Peck says he believes the gun is the main factor. “It depends if you have a sidearm exposed. I think it’s more intimidating to people.” When guns are concealed, “they see you as a person and not just an authority figure, and they’re more

apt to talk to you instead of just shy away.” Officers take the issue seriously, given their developing relationships with people on the street. “My attitude definitely changed toward the homeless as a result of doing this,” Peck says. “It’s a different way you perceive the people. You don’t perceive them as a nuisance any more. Now you want to help them instead of just pushing them along. Some of them we see week after week; we actually become friends.”

Adding a New Flavor

The symbiosis benefits the SOS outreach workers as well. “I never believed law enforcement could be used as a tool with social work,” Connolly says, but the program has taught him otherwise. The police, he adds, “bring a whole new flavor to outreach.”

He tells of finding a man living on the street who had an outstanding arrest warrant. The police, who typically use discretion not to make arrests during outreach, urged him to come into Court and go before the judge, who could clear the warrant and order the man to report to the sixth floor for social service consultations. He showed up the next day, resolved the warrant problem and enrolled in a detox program. In that case, Connolly credits the officers with persuading the man to come in, since if he didn’t, he knew he would have to deal with them the following day when they were back on regular patrol.

“I don’t see him every day,” Connolly says, “but the police do. If they had seen him the next day on the street, they would have said, ‘Hey, we thought you were going to go in to the Court. We gave you a break. What’s going on?’” The presence of police during outreach and the implied promise of serious follow-up “gives the clients more motivation,” Connolly says. “It makes compliance go up.”

The officers’ daily contact with people on the street also yields knowledge that can become a valuable source of feedback for outreach. Consider Rosario’s encounter with a woman who appears to have drunk herself to the edge of consciousness at the corner of 50th Street and Broadway. She calls herself Lisa, and she is sitting on a marble wall at the edge of a plaza with a companion who introduces herself as her concerned “sister.” The sister tells the outreach team that Lisa has declared her readiness to enter treatment and would welcome the chance to go for detox.

When prodded, Lisa mumbles, “yes, I’m ready; I want to go in.” But she continues to lean heavily against the other woman, head lolling. When Rosario and the sister help Lisa to her feet, she stumbles, collapses and lies prone on the sidewalk. After some discussion, Rosario suggests calling an ambulance to take Lisa to an emergency room where she can be sobered up enough for detox. At that point, Officer Conroy intervenes. “She’s always doing this,” he says. “She gets herself drunk, she goes to the emergency room, she sobers up, and the next day she’s out here just as drunk as she was the day before. They’re sick of seeing her at the hospital. She’s manipulative.”

“Well, she shouldn’t come for detox unless she’s really ready to do it,” Rosario says, regarding the body on the sidewalk. “But what are we supposed to do?”

“I say nothing,” Bedrin says, seeing that the police are in a better position to assess the situation than the SOS workers. “We’ll just have to wait until she’s ready

to walk in on her own.”

Reluctantly, Rosario agrees to leave, and the group returns to the police van. As they drive away, they look back at the street corner scene — in time to see Lisa get herself up, dust herself off and walk steadily over to resume her place on the wall.

‘These People Treated Me Right’

In the twelve months from October 1996 through October 1997, SOS outreach teams recorded 1,692 contacts with people on the street, a figure they estimate represents about 800 individuals. In the same time period, 265 people reported to the Court seeking services from the SOS caseworkers, for a rate of appearance that compares favorably with other outreach efforts. A team fielded by the Times Square Business Improvement District, for example, contacted 206 people over nine months, persuading 37 to come into a “respite center” for help. A New York City Transit Police homeless outreach unit reported one person accepting services for every seven contacted.

While the outreach workers invest a lot in their sales technique, they also know that the product has to be credible. The program, Connolly says, has to emphasize results, making sure that when people come in, they get substantive help. Much depends on word of mouth. When former clients revisit their old street haunts after being helped by SOS, their friends are impressed.

“When they come back weeks later” looking sober and clean, Connolly says, “and the other homeless people see them, well, the first thing [the clients] say is, ‘These people treated me right. If you want help, don’t talk to me, go see them.’ That’s the best sales point you can have. Your own advertising will only get you the first wave. If you’re not capable of delivering services in the quantity and quality you said you were going to, the second wave will never come.”

When clients show up on the sixth floor, the outreach workers question them based on a form that yields a simple assessment: housing needs, employment, substance abuse, eligibility for benefits. The majority need drug or alcohol detox and treatment, along with temporary housing. Many also say they want jobs. “When people come in, we don’t just make it a wish list,” Bedrin says. “What we try to do is make a concentrated effort on one service — we know you need a job, but let’s focus on these things first.” A lot of the people who come in saying they want to go to work won’t be employable, obviously, until they deal with more fundamental issues, like sobriety.

Building a Network

“I do a treatment plan,” Connolly says. “I’ll say, ‘All right. You’re unemployed, you have no identification, and you’re living in the streets. So, prioritize. First, we should get you a place to stay. Then we should get some of that identification back, because that’s going to help get you a job. And then ultimately we should get you a job with a focus on permanent housing.’”

Such a plan may require a bit of negotiation — on average, each client comes to the office for three or four visits. “Some clients say, ‘Listen, I’ll do whatever, but I’m not going to a city shelter.’” Connolly says he respects such feelings. When he and

the client agree to a plan, Connolly gets on the phone and starts looking for placements. The SOS workers keep lists of all the possibilities for substance abuse treatment, housing and employment. It's another sales challenge: treatment programs and employers need reassurance that the Court is screening out potentially troublesome clients; much depends on building a reputation for sound judgment.

So far, SOS is proudest of the relationship it has developed with the Concord Hotel, a big resort in the Catskill Mountains 90 miles north of New York City. Especially during the summer months, the hotel imports people from the city to bus tables, wash dishes and do other low-skill work, and it provides housing for them on its huge campus. "If you're going to be housed and you're going to be able to have a job, this is like a dream come true for the homeless," Bedrin says.

The SOS workers heard about the opportunity from people they met on the street who had gone upstate to work for the hotel. But the Concord's personnel department seemed skeptical when SOS called to ask about placing people there. "The hotel said, 'The homeless people come up and they bring their problems with them,'" Bedrin recalls. But they agreed to take a few people from SOS. In January 1997, two SOS recruits from the street went up to the Catskills, and within a few weeks, they were getting glowing reports from the hotel staff.

"They said, 'These guys are working great. We really like them,'" Bedrin says. So they agreed to take clients screened by SOS on an ongoing basis. So far, the program has sent 15 people to the Concord for stints of work. Only three have been dismissed for problems with substance abuse or work attitude.

On the Street

Marcus, a 24-year old from upstate New York, arrived in Manhattan early in 1997 with his savings from previous work and plans to build a life in the big city. They collapsed when muggers took his money, and he wound up at a drop-in center, spending his nights sleeping on tables and chairs. Outside the shelter one day, he found a crowd of people gathered around Dave Connolly and two cops. A friend said, "This guy finds jobs; talk to him and see what he can do." Marcus took Connolly's card and went up to the courthouse, where he met Dave Bedrin.

In Marcus, Bedrin found a somewhat unusual case: well groomed and well spoken, with no substance abuse problems, this basically was just a young man down on his luck. Bedrin decided to make Marcus the first SOS referral to Times Square Ink, a job training program started by the Court. Installed in an office at the Midtown Community Court, Times Square Ink trains participants in mailroom services, messenger, filing, faxing, copying and other office services for local businesses and the Court itself. Graduates are placed in non-subsidized jobs with local businesses.

In the first month, Times Square Ink taught "employability skills;" then Marcus moved on to the program's copy shop for eight-hour days of on-the-job training. The program paid a weekly stipend of \$35 to start; it rose to \$50 in the third month.

"You do the work, eight hours, sometimes longer," Marcus says. "It's tough, but I got through it." After he did so, Times Square Ink found him a job with a firm that

photocopies documents for attorneys. The money isn't terrific, Marcus thinks, but the benefits are good, and it's a start. Most important, steady income should make it possible to get out of the drop-in center. "I do want to get out of this place," he says. "I don't want the shelter life anymore."

The Future

SOS remains a work in progress with much to ponder for the future. How big should the program be? Three outreach workers hardly meet the demand in the Court's catchment area. Their numbers now are limited by resources and by the number of community patrol officers available to work with them. What would be the optimum number of outreach workers?

What kind of people should the program seek to hire? Rosario brought a female point of view and fluent Spanish to the effort; both appear to be enormous assets. Should the team make a point of working with female and Spanish-speaking police officers? How should officers be prepared for the assignment? So far, they have learned what they need to know simply by talking with outreach workers on the job and feeling their way. Is it time to develop more formal training for them? And should they become involved in the work of the sixth floor as well as outreach on the street?

What about the schedule? The SOS teams know that their clients tend to congregate in different places at different times of the day and night. And there is a benefit to predictability — people should know that SOS will be there to talk to them at certain times. What would the ideal calendar look like for the winter, and how should it change for the summer?

And how, finally, should SOS be evaluated? Tallies of contacts made and services provided offer a limited picture of the program's overall effects. How could researchers isolate and measure the program's broader impact on attitudes of cops, clients and the public?

Such questions reflect a successful start more than any fundamental flaw. Engaging 265 people as social work clients represents a credible achievement in the Midtown area in the first year; the numbers are likely to look better still in the next, given refinements to the program and three outreach workers on the street.¹

Beyond numbers, the experience so far dispels plenty of doubts. SOS demonstrates that putting police together with counselors on patrol is neither improbable nor unwise, given a mutual commitment to the project and a willingness to communicate. As practiced in midtown Manhattan, outreach raises no substantive civil liberties issues. Instead, it expands the horizons of police, while police provide security along with practical knowledge and insight crucial to the success of outreach. The Court, meanwhile, makes the most of its social work resources and strengthens its role in the neighborhood. The synergy benefits the Court, the police and all the people they serve.

¹ As of February, 2000, 774 people reported to the Court seeking services as a result of SOS outreach efforts.

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.

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