

How Community Advisory Boards Can Assist the Work of the Justice System

Community engagement is an essential component of a well-functioning justice system. By strategically engaging the public, justice agencies can foster trust and mutual understanding, build partnerships, and solve local problems. Through community engagement, the justice system can also access local resources, including community volunteers.

This fact sheet focuses on a single community engagement strategy: community advisory boards, providing guidance to justice practitioners interested in creating one.

Community advisory boards provide community members with a forum to air concerns, learn about the justice system, and steer new initiatives. They bring in voices and perspectives that are sometimes overlooked. And they send a strong symbolic message about accountability.

Although creating and sustaining a board can be rewarding, it can also be a challenge. Justice system administrators should be thoughtful when deciding on whether to develop a community advisory board. Start by determining if a community advisory board is the best way to engage the community or if another method of community outreach more appropriately fits your needs. In doing so, evaluate if a board will complement your organization's mission. Next, decide if your organization is prepared to dedicate the time needed to operate a successful board. Finally, decide if you are able to balance the differing views, interests, skills, and commitment levels of community members with the needs and limitations of the justice system.

If you decide to create a community advisory board, be realistic about what it can and cannot achieve. Community advisory boards can backfire if they are not managed properly or if members feel like they are being used rather than truly consulted.

This fact sheet is based on a survey of 20 small, mid-size, and large jurisdictions across the United States currently employing community advisory boards. It provides guidance on establishing goals, a review of practical considerations, and examples of accomplishments from around the country.



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1. GOALS

THE FIRST STEP IN CREATING A COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD IS TO DEVELOP CLEAR GOALS.

These are some goals community advisory boards across the country have adopted:

- Identify public safety and other community problems
- Provide feedback on operations and policies
- Identify community resources
- Access funding
- Brainstorm solutions to challenges

- Help recruit volunteers
- Inform priorities

When developing goals, think about why you are creating a community advisory board and how you will define success. Goals should be realistic, achievable, and measurable. They should be reevaluated regularly so that the board does not lose focus and stays true to its purpose.

2. MEMBERSHIP

DECIDING WHO WILL BE A PART OF THE COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD IS THE NEXT STEP IN THE PLANNING PROCESS.

The survey of 20 community advisory boards found that members included:

- Judges
- Public defenders
- Police, sheriffs, and other members of law enforcement
- Elected officials
- Community residents
- Representatives of faith-based organizations
- Staff of other relevant government agencies, such as education, transit, and health departments
- Prosecutors
- Court managers
- Probation/parole employees
- Community residents
- Representatives of social service partners
- Representatives of the business community
- Civic organizations
- Staff of other non-profits and community institutions

After deciding on who will be a part of your community advisory board, you may wish to

decide on requirements of new members, including how long members may serve on the community advisory board, whether members must be interviewed or provide references, and if members should have to sign some type of formal commitment letter.

Tip: When recruiting members, do not focus solely on titles. Think about including members who have strong but informal connections to the community, in addition to people who hold formal positions within community-based organizations.

Tip: During the membership selection process, be clear about the role of community advisory board members. To manage potential members' expectations, remind them of the board's goals and limitations, and the types of problems that are appropriate for the board to address.

Tip: Think long and hard about the size of the board. Large boards can be difficult to move toward consensus. Small boards inevitably exclude important perspectives.

3. FORMAT

WHEN DESIGNING THE FORMAT OF THE COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD, PLANNERS CAN USE THE FOLLOWING SIX QUESTIONS AS A GUIDE.

- Will meetings be open to the public?
- Where will meetings occur?
- When and how often will the board meet?
- Who will lead the meetings?
- How will meetings be run?
- How will the board be publicized?

Public vs. Private

Meetings that are open to the public can offer the opportunity for non-members to speak and share ideas. This allows wider community participation, but depending on the goals of the meetings, may make certain topics inappropriate or require lengthier meetings. Meetings that are not open to the public lose the opportunity to hear new voices, but may allow for more in-depth problem-solving when discussing sensitive information. Non-public meetings are generally shorter than public meetings. Always check with local law to determine whether community advisory boards are subject to “public meeting” requirements.

Meeting Place

If possible, hold meetings at a location that is central and convenient to the board’s members. Architecture matters - where a meeting is held can determine whether it is productive or not. Does the room have windows? Air conditioning? Is it viewed as neutral territory by all participants? For example, the Newark (NJ) Community Solutions Community Advisory Board holds its meetings at a local law school because this location is more convenient than the centralized courthouse.

Timing

Think about holding meetings at a time that is most convenient to the members (even if this sometimes means that they will be

less convenient for staff). To accomplish this, many community advisory boards hold meetings in the evenings, before work or during lunch hour.

Consider how frequently your board should meet, balancing your own needs with the community advisory board members’ needs. Check to see that your meeting does not conflict with other community meetings in order to maximize attendance.

Chairing the Board

The convening agency or a community member can lead the community advisory board. The San Francisco Community Justice Center Advisory Board is chaired by the judge who presides over the justice center’s court calendar, whereas the New York City Police Department Precinct Community Councils are led by an elected president and board members rather than law enforcement personnel.

Running Meetings

Create protocols for the community advisory board. Having a written agenda, establishing timeframes, and capturing and disseminating minutes are crucial tools for running efficient and constructive meetings. These tools make members feel invested in the process and prevents members from feeling as though the meetings are not meaningful or a waste of time.

Tip: If meetings include time for receiving community input, be clear about how and if the feedback will be used. Managing the community’s expectations will improve their trust in the community advisory board and will open lines of communication between community members and the justice system.

Publicizing the Community Advisory Board

A website or newsletter can publicize meeting dates, agendas, and minutes. Creating an annual report allows the community advisory board to publicize the board's accomplishments and set goals for the upcoming year.

Tip: Consider offering food during community advisory board meetings. Small items such as snacks or beverages may entice members to attend meetings, especially during breakfast or lunch hours. Just as important, food can help create atmosphere and set a welcoming tone for the gathering.

4. ACCOMPLISHMENTS

COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARDS CAN FOSTER IMPROVEMENTS WITHIN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM.

These improvements should respond to the needs and concerns of community members and may range from enhancing responses to persistent problems to opening communication lines between justice agencies and the public. Here are some examples of achievements from community advisory boards across the United States:

Creating New Programming

Community advisory boards can play an important role in creating new programming – such as community service projects, victim-offender discussion panels and crime prevention strategies. After members of the Midtown (NY) Community Court Community Conditions Panel expressed concern over the number of illegal street vendors in Midtown Manhattan, the court developed the Vendor Education Program, which educates unlicensed vendors about city regulations and offers resources to help them access services and gain legitimate employment. The conditions panel was instrumental in the implementation of the program and helping to research and write a manual that the court distributes to those charged with illegal vending.

Improving Communications

Community advisory boards can facilitate communication between the community and the criminal justice system, improving public trust in the justice system. The Mesa (AZ) Police Department Chief's Community Advisory Boards hold town hall meetings to

communicate new legislation's impact on the community. For example, when a recent immigration law was passed that affected a specific group of constituents, the advisory boards met with local residents to ease fears and misconceptions about the law.

Securing Resources

Community advisory boards provide access to new resources, such as funding and partnerships. The community advisory board of the Indianapolis Community Court helped identify organizations to provide on-site services. Services that have been added at the suggestion of advisory board members include: providing flu shots, securing birth certificates and ID Cards for community court clients, and brokering relationships with addiction counseling, housing, and employment training providers.

Planning Community Events

Local community events can be coordinated by the community advisory board. The Overland Park (OR) Community Court's Community Advisory Board collaborates with local law enforcement to plan and host the community's annual National Night Out Against Crime, an event that is aimed at celebrating crime reduction and an improvement in the quality of life in the neighborhood.

Identifying and Tackling Persistent Problems

Community advisory boards can assist the criminal justice system in identifying persistent public safety problems that negatively

impact the community. After a member of the advisory board at Bronx (NY) Community Solutions noticed that the Bronx was experiencing an influx of young people being arrested for trespassing, a partnership was developed with the Bronx Borough President's Office to create a trespassing awareness curriculum in schools to deter young people from committing this crime.

Tip: Be creative and realistic about what the community advisory board can accomplish. Keep it fresh so that the board's projects do not become routine, especially if the board has been in existence for several years.

FURTHER READING

Engaging the Community: A Guide for Community Justice Planners
www.courtinnovation.org/research/engaging-community-guide-community-justice-planners

Red Hook Planning Diary Excerpt: Engaging the Community
www.courtinnovation.org/research/red-hook-planning-diary-excerpt-engaging-community

Tip: Communicate both your accomplishments and your failures to the community. Failures provide important lessons about public policy, helping inform the public about which strategies and programs work and which don't. Willingness to discuss failures in public also helps build the court's credibility.

Tip: Consider holding a strategic planning exercise each year to set the community advisory board's priorities.

Engaging Stakeholders in Your Project
www.courtinnovation.org/sites/default/files/documents/engaging_2010.pdf

'The Public Wants to be Involved': A Roundtable Conversation about Community and Restorative Justice
www.courtinnovation.org/research/public-wants-be-involved-roundtable-conversation-about-community-and-restorative-justice

CENTER FOR COURT INNOVATION

The winner of the Peter F. Drucker Award for Non-profit Innovation, the Center for Court Innovation is a unique public-private partnership that promotes new thinking about how the justice system can solve difficult problems like addiction, quality-of-life crime, domestic violence, and child neglect.

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