

## RESOURCE COORDINATORS BRIDGE COURTROOMS AND SOCIAL SERVICES

For many, going to court is an intimidating experience that provokes anxiety. The courtroom is often difficult to navigate, especially for those unfamiliar with the legal process or who speak English as a second language. Furthermore, many go to court knowing they will leave with a fine they are unable to pay or with jail time. Meanwhile, the problems at the root of their alleged crime—whether substance or mental disorders, homelessness, or unemployment—often go unaddressed. Recognizing these issues, some courts have implemented new approaches to make the court process more accessible and help people access the services they need. One such approach is the creation of a new staff role: resource coordinator.

The Midtown Community Court in New York City introduced the role of the resource coordinator when it opened in 1993. Its core function is to act as the main liaison between clinical and courtroom staff. While the role originated in a community court, numerous other courts have since adopted similar approaches that bridge the legal process and social services.

### CASE STUDIES

The following four case studies—of the Red Hook Community Justice Center, Brooklyn Justice Initiatives, Oklahoma City Municipal Court, and Hennepin County Restorative Court—offer examples of how programs across the country have implemented resource coordinator roles that meet local needs.

### RED HOOK COMMUNITY JUSTICE CENTER'S RESOURCE COORDINATOR

**Context.** The country's first multi-jurisdictional community court, the Red Hook Community Justice Center in Brooklyn, New York, handles cases that normally require three different courts: criminal, housing, and family. Drawing from the experience of the Midtown Community Court, Red Hook included a resource coordinator in its original project design, knowing that the role would be critically important to the justice center's mission. The resource coordinator touches almost every aspect of the court process.

**Goals.** The resource coordinator at Red Hook aims to help litigants in diverse types of cases access a wide array of services that can help address the underlying issues that may have brought them to court. The resource coordinator helps to guide litigants through the court process, links them to court-mandated and voluntary services, and offers support as litigants complete their programs. To facilitate these linkages, the resource coordinator works



Alvin Lott (l), resource coordinator at the Red Hook Community Justice Center, greets a program participant.

closely with staff in the clinical department, and acts as the liaison between clinicians and the court.

**Daily Activities.** Although the resource coordinator has a desk in the courtroom near the judge’s bench, much of the day involves moving between the on-site holding cells, the in-house treatment clinic, various program offices, attorneys’ offices, and the courtroom. The resource coordinator greets litigants who have been to court before, introduces himself to those who are new, and explains what support he can offer.

To keep track of which participants are in the building, he checks the dockets each morning and periodically visits the on-site holding cells. The presiding judge often calls him to the bench to ask about particular clients, and he talks with the clinic’s social workers to ensure that clients’ mandates are appropriate. He also tracks clients’

progress and reports on the record about compliance by relaying information that he receives each day from the clinical staff to the court. This can include the results of clinical assessments, treatment recommendations from the clinic, and compliance information.

As the client’s primary point of contact at the court, the resource coordinator is in a position to help identify issues that need attention. For example, a client may be withdrawing from drugs and unable to stand in court, experiencing an abusive relationship they need help with, or require public transit fare to make their next appearance.

**Employer Agency.** Red Hook’s resource coordinator is an employee of the New York State Unified Court System and is supervised within the court system’s normal administrative structure.

## BROOKLYN JUSTICE INITIATIVES’ RESOURCE COORDINATORS

**Context.** Inspired by the Midtown Community Court and Red Hook Community Justice Center, Brooklyn Justice Initiatives brought the role of the resource coordinator to Brooklyn’s two main courthouses. Two senior coordinators focus on the day-to-day management of 15 resource coordinators, connecting Brooklyn Justice Initiatives to clients, numerous courtrooms, and dozens of judges across the two courthouses. The resource coordinators are divided into two teams, one focusing on alternatives to detention, or pre-plea services, and the other focusing on alternatives to incarceration, or post-plea services. All coordinators report to the Brooklyn Justice Initiatives’ director of court operations, who also takes the lead on training, reporting, and meetings with judges and attorneys to introduce Brooklyn Justice Initiatives, communicate programmatic changes, build trust, and solve problems.

**Goals.** Resource coordinators aim to provide pretrial supervised release and post-conviction sentencing options to people charged with or convicted of

misdemeanors or felonies. In order to build credibility in the courthouse—and meet the needs of clients, court officers, and clinicians—resource coordinators aim to be consistent, visible, and flexible with their support.

**Daily Activities.** As new potential clients enter the courtrooms, resource coordinators make an effort to introduce themselves. Once a client becomes a Brooklyn Justice Initiatives participant, the resource coordinator is their main point of contact. They screen participants, explain program services and paperwork to them, and



Brooklyn Justice Initiatives  
Red Hook Community Justice Center

New York

answer their and their attorneys' questions. They also transmit information they learn during the screening process to clinicians to assist with the intake process.

After clients meet with social workers and begin their mandates, resource coordinators track their progress, provide appointment reminders, check in with clients, and report on their compliance during court hearings.

## OKLAHOMA CITY MUNICIPAL COURT'S COMMUNITY RELATIONS COORDINATORS

**Context.** The Oklahoma City Municipal Court hears all traffic and criminal misdemeanor cases that occur within the city and is staffed by four municipal judges. In 2017, recognizing the need for improved communication between judges, service providers, and clients, the court created a new position: community relations coordinator. Soon after, the court hired a second coordinator to meet the demand for services. Today, a community relations coordinator is stationed outside two of the court's first-floor courtrooms.

**Goals.** An important goal of the community relations coordinators is engaging with litigants who distrust the justice system and doing everything they can to provide litigants with support as they make their way through the court process. This includes ensuring that people being held in jail have seen their public defender and have been assessed for mental health needs and other issues. Since the Municipal Court does not mandate social services through this program (the court uses its probation department for those cases), coordinators provide informal, voluntary service referrals. The coordinators also conduct outreach in the community, speaking with service providers and churches, doing interviews on TV news and radio, and even hosting an open mic night in order to educate the community about the programs the court offers.

**Daily Activities.** When clients arrive in court, the community relations coordinators greet them, help them understand the process, and begin to address

**Employer Agency.** Senior coordinators and resource coordinators are employed by the Center for Court Innovation, which partners with the court system to operate Brooklyn Justice Initiatives.

any barriers they are facing. They also invite clients to schedule an appointment where they can spend more time answering questions before the client's court date, accompany them to the courtroom if they are nervous, and help them understand and complete paperwork. While they are not lawyers and do not provide legal advice, they provide some basic information about the court process and refer clients to other services. For example, the coordinators work with litigants with limited English language proficiency to reduce the anxiety of court appearances.

Under certain circumstances, the coordinators interact directly with the judge in the courtroom. For example, they alert judges if they know a client has specific issues that may affect behavior in the courtroom. A judge may also call a coordinator into the courtroom if a client is struggling or confused, and the coordinator can help explain the process.

**Employer Agency.** Community relations coordinators are employed by the city and report to the court administrator.



Oklahoma City Municipal Court

Oklahoma

## HENNEPIN COUNTY RESTORATIVE COURT'S SOCIAL WORKERS

**Context.** In Minneapolis, the city prosecutor and public defender noted that many court cases involve low-level criminal activity—like disorderly conduct, misdemeanor theft, or drug possession—and that defendants often need services to help them address challenges and avoid reoffending. To better connect defendants with these services, they partnered with Hennepin County's Adult Behavioral Health agency to provide social workers to engage with defendants and provide needed support. After a six-month pilot period, the program was formally dubbed the Hennepin County Restorative Court in February 2019.

**Goals.** Instead of responding punitively, the Restorative Court has adopted an approach that relies on social workers, rather than probation officers, to connect clients with services. In the process, it aims to keep clients in court as briefly as possible, consistent with research on the potentially traumatizing and disruptive effects of court involvement.



**Hennepin County Restorative Court**  
Minnesota

**Daily Activities.** The court meets once a week and hears misdemeanor cases from throughout the City of Minneapolis, with a few exceptions including those involving domestic violence, firearms, DWI, and offenses committed by someone already on probation or parole. One judge, one city attorney, and one public defender are assigned to the court, creating a consistent environment that helps the social workers develop trust with clients.

The social workers connect with clients – who are referred either by public defenders or assistant city attorneys—at their first Restorative Court appearance, asking whether they are currently engaged in any services. Within a few days, they meet with clients again to conduct a full assessment and establish an individualized treatment plan, making it clear that participation in the Restorative Court is voluntary; there is no clinical mandate. The social workers then refer clients to services and work with them to establish personal goals separate from their clinical mandate.

Although the social workers maintain offices near the courtroom, they spend most of their time in the community working with clients. They do not sit in the courtroom, nor do they interact with the judge. Often, they assist clients by accompanying them to appointments, helping them apply for ID, and navigating services with them. They also collaborate closely with the attorneys, updating them on the clients' progress and challenges.

**Employer Agency.** Hennepin County Adult Behavioral Health employs four social workers at the Restorative Court.

## TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTING A RESOURCE COORDINATOR POSITION

As these four case studies illustrate, the resource coordinator role can be implemented in a variety of different settings, including community courts, in busy centralized courthouses, inside or outside the courtroom, and with or without direct engagement with the court. Likewise, the role is flexible and can encompass a range of responsibilities that include greeting litigants and

helping them navigate the court process, conducting assessments to identify clients' needs, making appointments for clients or helping with paperwork, referring clients to voluntary or court-ordered services, monitoring clients' compliance with court mandates, providing updates to the court, and more. While a resource coordinator's specific responsibilities may vary based on local needs, what is clear is that having a resource coordinator can help connect

defendants with needed services, can serve as an important link between the court and service providers, and can enable the court and clients to achieve better outcomes. However the resource coordinator role is implemented, planners are advised to follow these general guidelines.

1. **Build a strong collaborative team.** Resource coordinators need the foundation of a supportive team—one that checks in regularly and advises each other—in order to do their work sustainably. In addressing trauma, as many coordinators must, it is crucial to set boundaries and share support with supervisors and teammates. In order to foster a healthy work environment, teams should establish shared understandings of the limits of their work well before they implement the program. The team must also have effective systems of communication in place, as the resource coordinators are often the conduit of information between multiple parties.
2. **Develop trust with key stakeholders.** A program must know and gain buy-in from key stakeholders in the court and the community. Prior relationships with judges and attorneys help in this goal, as the case of Hennepin County Restorative Court demonstrates. The Restorative Court’s social workers have been effective, in part, because they have built trust by working with a consistent team of one judge, one public defender, and one assistant city attorney. Meanwhile, Brooklyn Justice Initiatives’ program shows the potential for resource coordinators to develop trust with a much larger group of judges and attorneys—as well as

the broader community they serve—through their consistent presence, participation and support in the downtown courthouses where they operate.

3. **Understand the nuances of the legal system and available resources.** Resource coordinators must have an extensive knowledge of local and state social service systems in order to navigate them and advise clients in the legal system. For example, prior experience working with mental health agencies supported resource coordinators in Oklahoma City and Hennepin County in carrying out their roles, since they require a detailed understanding of the resources available in their community in order to provide clients with accurate information.
4. **Select a resource coordinator who is dedicated and personable.** Dedication and people skills lie at the heart of the resource coordinator role, since there are many challenges and clients have their unique struggles and circumstances. The coordinators in all four courts possess strong interpersonal and communication skills; are highly capable of adapting to a variety of situations and environments; and display strong empathy and an ability to see different perspectives. In Red Hook, for example, the resource coordinator knows every client by name and is seen as an ally and “cheerleader” in court for them, which is especially important when their assigned social workers cannot be there. Those best positioned to fill such roles often also come from the communities where they work, which can provide them with a genuine understanding of local needs.

## CONCLUSION

By bridging social services, clients, and court actors, resource coordinators help make the court process more efficient. When there is one caring and knowledgeable point person, the court saves clients the frustrating experience of being sent to different people and never reaching anyone who can help. Often, resource coordinators are the only people stationed in the

courtroom who can answer detailed questions about the program and make sure that all the court representatives are on the same page. While establishing this new role in the court process may at first appear daunting because of resource limitations, it is possible. Courts do not have to start big to accomplish these important goals. They just have to start.

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