
"Team Red Hook" Addresses Wide Range of Community Needs

Alex Calabrese is the presiding justice at the Red Hook Community Justice Center, a multi-jurisdictional community court that opened this year in a renovated parochial school in southwest Brooklyn. Red Hook is a waterfront neighborhood that has long been plagued by drugs and crime. Home to one of New York's oldest and largest public housing developments, Red Hook is notorious for the 1992 slaying of Patrick Daly, an elementary school principal who was accidentally killed in a drug-related shoot-out.

The following reflects Alex Calabrese's experiences with the project as told to Pamela Young of the Center of Court Innovation.

It's no secret that the residents of Red Hook face a wide range of problems that don't conform to the jurisdictional boundaries of our court system. A single family could find itself in Criminal Court, Housing Court and Family Court under the traditional court system. At the Red Hook Community Justice Center, we are combining these jurisdictions, bringing all of these cases into one courtroom with one judge. The goal is to offer, as much as possible, a coordinated approach to people's problems.

We began in April by hearing criminal cases, including misdemeanors and Class D and E felonies, desk appearance tickets and summonses. Like the Midtown Community Court before it, the Red Hook Community Justice Center tries to determine the underlying problem that led to the defendant's criminal behavior, whether it is addiction, homelessness, lack of education or something else. We require defendants to address their problems, while at the same time repaying the community harmed by their crime.

A typical sentence can include mandatory drug treatment, job training, GED classes, community service or a combination. The community benefits directly, not only from the mandated community service—such as painting over neighborhood graffiti and cleaning local parks—but, more important, from having a member of the community who has gotten to the cause of his or her criminal activity and addressed it.

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Alex Calabrese moved to the Red Hook Community Justice Center after three years in Brooklyn Criminal Court. Before becoming a judge, he served as a lawyer for the Legal Aid Society and as a law assistant to Judge Leslie Crocker Snyder in Manhattan Supreme Court. A native of the Bronx, he has lived in Brooklyn for 20 years. He is a graduate of Notre Dame University and received his J.D. degree from Fordham Law School.



Entrance to the Red Hook Community Justice Center in Brooklyn.

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One-Stop Shopping

On-site services at the Justice Center include alcohol and drug treatment, job training, GED classes, computer labs, medical examinations and mental health counseling. To help families with small children, we even have on-site day care so that they can drop off their children while they are taking advantage of the services we offer.

Needless to say, courts can't provide all of these services on their own. We need partners. The Justice Center has brought together some of the city's best service providers, including Phoenix House, Victim Services, the Community Health Care Network and the Board of Education. They are all on-site and working side by side. The bottom line is that we can offer "one-stop shopping" for people in need, whether they are defendants or walk-ins from the community.

Having these services at our fingertips allows us to respond to problems in the neighborhood quickly and effectively. For example, a local school called us recently to say that a group of kids were starting to form a gang. I went to the school to talk to the students. Our clinical

director put together an anger management curriculum. A court officer who grew up in the neighborhood offered to talk to the kids about his perspective as a member of the community. And the Brooklyn district attorney's office brought in a former gang member who runs anti-violence programs across the country.

Team Red Hook

The real power of the Justice Center is the people who work here. I am proud to be just one of the members of what we call "Team Red Hook." Sandra Martin-Smith has put together a team of clerks, cross-trained to handle criminal, family and housing issues. Lieutenant Sean Egan and the other court officers set the tone for the Justice Center at the entrance to the building.

The clerks and the court officers—along with attorneys from the Brooklyn D.A.'s Office and the Legal Aid Society—have helped sponsor a local youth baseball league run by the Justice Center. And a few have volunteered to manage teams and mentor some little leaguers during the week.

But the people who work at the Justice Center are just part of the Red Hook story. This project would not be possible without the support of hundreds of community residents. In fact, it was a group of local residents who actually selected the site for the Justice Center. A task force from the local community board toured a number of potential locations before settling on the old Visitation School as the right choice. I think they were interested in seeing a valuable community resource brought back to life after being vacant for a number of years.

The Urban Red Cross

We have only recently opened our doors to hear court cases, but the Justice Center has been a presence in Red Hook for years. The first piece of the Justice Center actually started in 1995, well before construction of the courthouse was completed. The Red Hook Public Safety Corps is an AmeriCorps community service program that consists of 50 members from Red Hook and surrounding neighborhoods. In return for an educational award, they perform one year of community service—fixing broken windows in the Red Hook Houses, helping out in our child care center, and escorting domestic violence victims. Essentially, it's a program that provides civic-minded residents with a chance to do positive things for their own community.

The Public Safety Corps has become a big part of the Justice Center team—they do whatever it takes to get the job done. For example, last August a tremendous rainstorm in Brooklyn left some houses in the neighborhood flooded. During the storm, I came out to Red Hook to check on our neighbors. Sure enough, several

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Center for Court Innovation Provides Research and Development

Much of New York's experimentation with problem-solving jurisprudence has grown out of the Center for Court Innovation, an innovative public-private partnership that serves as the court system's independent research and development arm.

Under the direction of John Feinblatt, the center is responsible for investigating problems within the courts, devising new solutions and field-testing their effectiveness. Starting with the Midtown Community Court, the center has helped to create a wide range of problem-solving courts in New York City, including drug courts, domestic violence courts and family drug treatment courts. It has also provided technical assistance to problem-solving courts throughout the state, serving as the host for site visits, writing how-to manuals and helping planners figure out what will work best in their community.

In recognition of its pioneering efforts to foster ongoing court innovation, the Center for Court Innovation received an Innovations in American Government Award, an honor annually bestowed upon 10 of the nation's most groundbreaking public programs by the Ford Foundation, Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government and the Council for Excellence in Government.

More information about the center and its programs from the following, or from the web site, www.communitycourts.org

Center for Court Innovation:

John Feinblatt at (212) 373-8080

Domestic Violence Courts:

Emily Sack at (212) 373-8085

Drug Treatment Courts:

Valerie Raine at (718) 643-7626

Community Courts:

Alfred Siegel at (212) 373-1699

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of them had flooded basements. So, I called the Public Safety Corps at about 7:30 in the evening. The next morning, when I visited them again, I saw that the Public Safety Corps was already on the job. That is how committed they are to helping the community. They are like an urban version of the Red Cross.

A Jury of Peers

Another important component of "Team Red Hook" is the Red Hook Youth Court, which focuses on low-level youth offenders. Youth Court is composed of local teenagers who are trained to be the judge, jury and advocates. The court uses positive peer pressure to ensure that young people who have committed offenses such as truancy, fare beating and shoplifting understand that their behavior has an impact on not just themselves but also their families and the community. As sanctions, they are required to perform community service, write a letter of apology or attend a session of life-mapping skills where they are shown what is necessary to attain their personal goals.

I attended one hearing where a youth offender was caught with a box cutter in school. At first he said he was holding it for a friend and the teacher just happened to catch him "at a bad time." Once the members of Youth Court started questioning him—the jury is allowed to ask questions—it became clear that he had indeed taken the box cutter to school. Then the jury asked, "Does your little brother look up to you?" The client answered, "Yes." The jury asked, "Would you want him carrying a box cutter to school?" The client answered, "Of course not!" The young judge asked the clinching question, "If your younger brother sees you take a box cutter to school and he looks up to you, why isn't he going to do the same thing?" You could almost see the offender start to think about being a role model and the message his behavior sent to his family and the community.

We have found that young people are more effective in delivering these kinds of messages to their peers than adults. I've seen a lot of Youth Court sessions and I know that an adult could talk to the offenders for two weeks straight and not get the same results as one Youth Court session. Most important, an effective intervention at a young age may save a kid from coming before me in criminal court when he or she is older and their problems have grown bigger.