

COURT-COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS: STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

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This article relates the efforts of the Superior Court of Arizona in Maricopa County to deliver effective community outreach. Ultimately, no single standing program can successfully maintain community outreach; rather, courts are challenged to pursue and coordinate a project-based approach, fostering both public education and citizen input.

Outreach as a Component of Court Management: A Historical Perspective

With the continuing emphasis on community outreach by courts, it is ironic that our nation began with what were, in essence, community courts. However, the relationship between courts and their communities became weaker as our nation developed and urban courts expanded. Our court systems centralized as urban areas required new types of specialized courts (Rottman, 1996). From the 1940s through the 1960s, state legislatures adopted court reform agendas that created single, urban downtown courthouses or rural, multicounty court districts (Rottman, 1998). While this centralization brought operational efficiencies, it also resulted in less court visibility within the community. For example, in 1931, 556 courts were serving the citizens of Chicago, but, 65 years later, a single court with a main courthouse and 10 satellite locations served the city (Rottman, 1996). Our communities did not respond positively to this change. As a result, our nation's courts have focused once again on strengthening ties between communities and courts.

Origins of Community Outreach

While court outreach into the community may seem like a relatively new focus, the need for such outreach has existed for quite some time. Even in 1906, Roscoe Pound bemoaned the need for improved public understanding and confidence in the courts in his famous speech on public dissatisfaction with the administration

of justice. However, this sentiment took time to gain acceptance as a principle of court administration. It was not until the 1960s that we began to see widespread literature focused on communication and outreach.

During the 1960s and 1970s, as national commissions focused on community involvement in the criminal justice system, ideas such as citizen participation, court-watching programs, judicial disciplinary commissions, and permanent court advisory committees flourished (Rottman, 1996). By the 1980s, development of polling technology provided the ability to reliably ascertain the state of public attitudes toward legal institutions, and opportunities for citizen participation in the justice system were expanding and arguably plentiful.

Development of Modern Problem-Solving Courts

The focus on citizen participation and access to justice merged with heightened concern about the kinds of cases reaching the courts. Problems such as substance abuse and domestic violence overwhelmed the capacities of our justice system. This resulted in the creation of problem-solving courts to address public offenses committed by specific groups of defendants, such as the homeless, mentally ill, veterans, or substance abusers. In 1993, the first community court, a subset of problem-solving courts, opened in midtown Manhattan with the goal of combining punishment and help. Then, in 1994 with Bureau of Justice Assistance funding, the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) began an ambitious program to examine community-focused courts as a mechanism to strengthen the court-community relationship. In 2006, 26 community courts were operating in the United States (Toomey, 2006).

Early Studies on Public Perceptions of the Court

Early research on trial courts in the 1950s through early 1970s reported five main findings: (1) the public was generally supportive of the courts, (2) public awareness and knowledge of courts was very low, (3) the more people knew about the courts the less supportive they were, (4) attitudes toward courts were linked to attitudes toward government in general, and (5) the public believed that courts treat some people better than others (Warren, 1998). From this research, public trust and confidence became accepted key measures of court performance, as reflected in the NCSC's Trial Court Performance Standards.

Dimensions of Community Outreach: The Conventional Wisdom

Courts stand to gain from community outreach: an informed and engaged constituency, broad public support, and access to needed public resources. The public appreciates a more open and transparent court system that provides an improved quality of justice. To achieve this outreach, courts must bear in mind the public's three core expectations of the courts: protection of society, equality/fairness, and quality performance (Yankelovich, Skelly and White, Inc., 1978).

Current State of Community Outreach

Community outreach has developed into a fundamental tenet of the court management profession. The significance of community outreach by courts is such that it is now a rubric within the National Association for Court Management's (NACM) Core Competencies, as well as the NCSC's *CourtTools* performance management program. The 2010 NACM *Media Guide for Today's Courts* demonstrates that community outreach has expanded even further to include use of social media and court Web sites to provide newsletters, press releases, virtual tours, historical information, kids' pages, high-profile-case subscription services, blogs, and resources that ensure compliance with federal Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and Americans with Disabilities (ADA) laws.¹

The escalation in priority of community outreach can be attributed to many factors. It may be due, in part, to funding-agency demands that the courts show concrete performance improvements to justify resources, even though the delivery of justice remains difficult to measure (Borys, 2003). Or it could be said that matters were worse in the 1800s and early 1900s, but we no longer automatically accept the customs and social mores of those eras (Yankelovich, Skelly and White, Inc., 1978). Irrespective of the reasons, community outreach is now engrained in our court management culture.



Superior Court of Arizona, Maricopa County's Facebook Page

Elements of Successful Community Outreach

Community outreach has the dual goals of disseminating information that the court perceives the public needs and meeting the information needs of the public. Media sound bites and misinformation about the justice system may contribute to a lack of public understanding and a decreased respect for courts as a whole. However, so many barriers to public understanding of court systems exist that it is difficult to address this lack of understanding systemically. Maintaining judicial independence may create an isolated court system. Public apathy may also limit public interest in court-disseminated information. Courts also encounter cultural barriers such as legal jargon or lack of diversity.

Given the findings of the early public perception studies, a singular outreach effort providing voluminous generic information about the court may actually prove to be unproductive. Yet the courts have a "good story" to tell regarding the provision of fair and impartial justice, mechanisms for early dispute resolution, and public safety. The challenge, then, is twofold: (1) to formulate a succinct and credible message specifically highlighting local court services and (2) to engage in an active, meaningful dialogue with the community.

Courts desiring to demonstrate a commitment to community outreach must decide upon an outreach strategy: citizen participation in formal standing bodies, informal ad hoc community involvement, or both. Whether formal or informal methods are used, an ongoing two-way dialogue is crucial for meaningful communication (Rottman, 1998). Some jurisdictions facilitate this dialogue through standing citizen or innovation commissions.² This dialogue can also be fostered through various means, such as surveys, focus groups, press releases, annual reports, and thoughtful Web-page content.

Effective community collaboration requires planning, goals, judicial sponsorship, committed stakeholders who are invested in the process, incorporation of existing infrastructures where possible, and identification of financial resources. The stakeholder groups include victim advocates, representatives of the ADA community, state and local social-service providers, prosecutors and defense counsel, the school system, and the bar. Presiding judges and court managers play a critical leadership role in the executive sponsorship of these community outreach efforts and courtwide coordination of supporting activities.

These collaborative efforts can be aided by setting easily attainable short-term goals to ensure success, as well as broader goals requiring long-term effort (Rottman, 1998). Once implemented, outreach initiatives should be evaluated and enhanced as well. Collaborations growing out of a single narrow project—such as community courts—may not necessarily have the flexibility to garner a broader systemic collaboration (Rottman, 1998).

Lessons Learned: A Multifaceted Approach in an Urban Court

Over the last two decades, the Superior Court of Arizona in Maricopa County has undertaken a number of interrelated community outreach efforts, some continued to this day and others of more limited duration. In retrospect, some of the short-term initiatives were “personality-driven” under the leadership of a strong presiding judge, while others were responsive to particular community needs at a given time. Other outreach and education programs have endured over the years, with varying levels of participation and continuing program enhancements.

Serving a diverse population of 3.8 million residents, the Superior Court of Arizona in Maricopa County has struggled to define the meaning of “local community” and to develop a cohesive communications strategy. The county encompasses approximately 9,800 square miles, which is home to 25 independent municipalities ranging from small towns such as Gila Bend (pop. 1,922) to metropolitan Phoenix (pop. 1,445,632). Until the current economic downturn slowed its growth rate dramatically, Maricopa County also experienced tremendous annual population growth; nonetheless, the county has nearly doubled in size since 1990. The population growth has spurred the development of countless new neighborhoods, schools, town centers, and a highly mobile workforce.

Historically, the court’s formal community outreach programs have included a business leaders’ forum, a religious leaders’ forum, and, most recently (from 2007 to 2009), community open-forum meetings held at schools and community centers. The superior court recently hired a multimedia journalist (“backpack reporter”) to promote public education. In addition, current standing community-education/outreach programs include:

- Extensive Web-based public information and court services, as well as increasing use of social media, such as issuing daily announcements and high-profile-case updates via Facebook (facebook.com/pages/Phoenix-AZ/Superior-Court-of-Arizona-in-Maricopa-County/324889836882) and Twitter (<http://twitter.com/courtpio>). Longer public information videos are posted on YouTube (www.youtube.com/user/SuperiorCourtAS/videos).
- “View from the Bench”: An Arizona Supreme Court initiative that pairs legislators with judges for a day at the legislature and a day at court.
- “Courthouse Experience”: High-school and middle-school students visit the court for a half day, with tours led by volunteer attorneys. In 2010, some 1,578 students visited the court.
- Hosting mock trials for law schools, high schools, and the National Mock Trial competition.
- Litigant and citizen assessments of overall court performance through the National Center for State Courts’ *CourtTools* survey, other surveys, and biannual judicial performance review (JPR) of individual judges.
- Volunteers serving the court in the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and the Probate Court’s Guardianship Review programs.

Citizen Input

In recent years, some of the superior court’s most effective engagement with the community and stakeholder groups has occurred in tightly focused, one-time planning sessions for specific court projects such as problem-solving courts. These project-based exchanges have provided a purpose-driven opportunity for genuine stakeholder input regarding constituent needs, identification, and leveraging of community-based resources and candid feedback on the quality of



Superior Court of Arizona, Maricopa County’s Twitter page

court services. In Maricopa County, some of the joint initiatives have resulted in strong court-community partnerships, lending credibility to court programs and supporting funding requests.

Recent examples of these ad hoc, program-based community-involvement projects include:

- Extensive involvement of victim advocates, media representatives, persons with disabilities (ADA), and law-enforcement officials in the programming and design of the criminal court tower, which opened in February 2012.
- Victim and social-service-provider involvement in problem-solving and therapeutic courts programs, including restitution court, family drug court, the integrated mental health court, and juvenile drug court.
- Participation of the Veteran’s Administration and community groups in the development of the veteran’s court.
- Involvement of the county’s Lodestar Day Resource Center campus, city courts, prosecutors and defense counsel, and the board of supervisors in expansion of the regional homeless court program.
- Extensive involvement of the community service providers, the medical community, and the Arizona Department of Child Protective Services (CPS) in the planning and development of the “Cradle to Crayons” program for dependency cases heard by the juvenile court.

From an organization management standpoint, the emergence of such ad hoc court-community outreach opportunities requires a high degree of courtwide communication, cross-department coordination, and integration with the long-standing outreach programs.

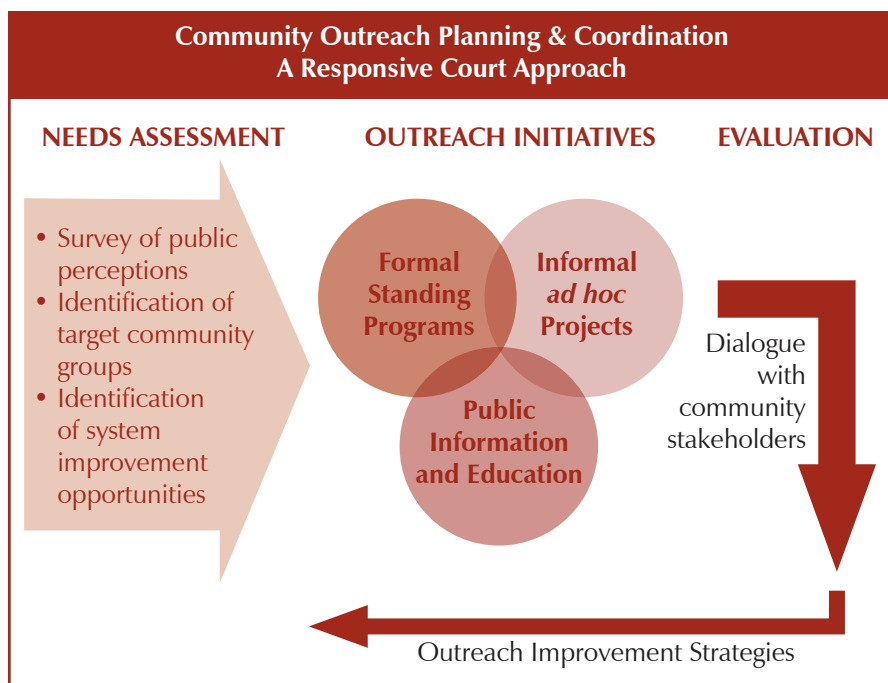
A framework for community outreach planning and coordination is set forth in the figure on the next page. This is an iterative, planning, and continuous improvement process involving periodic needs assessment; inventory and integration of outreach efforts and public information education; and dialogue with community stakeholders. Absent such coordination, the court is prone to duplication of staff efforts, “mixed messages” to the public, overreliance on certain friends of the court, and missed opportunities.



Superior Court’s “Criminal Tower,” planned with significant stakeholder involvement.

For the needs-assessment component of the planning process, the superior court relies on trend data from several sources: *CourtTools* public-satisfaction surveys; *CourtTools* and county-employee-satisfaction surveys; a bench-satisfaction survey regarding court administration services; juror exit surveys; and feedback from various standing committee meetings (e.g., bench-bar, civil study, Hispanic media quarterly meetings, and Juvenile’s Tinker Toys, renamed the Children’s Coalition of Maricopa County, which currently meets on an ad hoc basis).

To coordinate these efforts, the superior court is reconstituting and bolstering various judge-led standing committees—Public Access to Court Services, Specialty Courts, Media Relations, Education and Intergovernmental Relations—which report monthly to the court’s Judicial Executive Committee. Concurrently,



supporting administrative staff regularly convene for project updates, coordination of outreach efforts, and identification of target community populations.

These measures notwithstanding, the court has much work ahead to consolidate these gains and expand capacity for future community partnerships.

Final Thoughts

The superior court's judicial leadership and administrators conclude that no single, formal community outreach program can fully address the pressing need for public education and citizen input. As a consequence, the court's outreach strategy can now be described as a series of loosely coupled standing/ongoing community-outreach programs, along with a situational, opportunistic approach engaging ad hoc stakeholder groups for specific court initiatives. This approach may be viable in other jurisdictions, building upon a strong local court message and project-based opportunities for meaningful citizen involvement.

ENDNOTES

¹ Regarding LED and ADA laws, see Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended, 42 U.S.C. § 2000d et seq., and 42 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq. (1990).

² Two examples are the District of Columbia’s nonprofit, nonpartisan Council for Court Excellence (www.courtexcellence.org) and New York’s public/private partnership, the Center for Court Innovation (www.courtinnovation.org/topic/community-court).

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