

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Courting the community

### Justice center will address causes of crime by aiding offenders, victims

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On any given day, take a walk in the Tenderloin, Civic Center or South of Market, and you will see the same problems that have plagued our neighborhoods for decades: drugs, theft, prostitution, auto break-ins and aggressive panhandling. Has the justice system forgotten about these neighborhoods? No. But the fact is that low-level offenders cycle through the system, at a cost to the city of hundreds of thousands of dollars. The result? Offenders don't get the life-saving help they need, victims lose faith in the justice system, and neighbors have to live in a dangerous and frightening environment.

The time has come to break away from the status quo. We owe it to the community, to the victims -- and to the offenders. Many people who are living on the streets are suffering from addiction and mental illness and receiving no treatment. Turning a blind eye and doing nothing is not compassionate -- not for those individuals, and not for our neighborhoods. That's why the two of us are partnering to launch the Community Justice Center, a collaborative, problem-solving service center with a court on site.

The center is one promising way to begin to break the cycle and make a difference in our neighborhoods. The center will provide accountability for lower-level criminal behavior, and at the same time address the root issues associated with this behavior, such as substance abuse, mental illness or lack of shelter. The center is based on the principle of immediacy -- immediacy of consequences and immediacy of services. The key is to have everything under one roof: criminal justice agencies, service providers and members of the bench. It's a simple but effective model.

Right now, a police officer who sees someone breaking into a car would arrest the offender, who later would be released and told to come back to court on a future date. Too many never make it back to court. In the model we envision, that same police officer can immediately bring the offender to the new, comprehensive service center.

Once at the center, the offender will meet with a public defender, have his or her case reviewed by a prosecutor, appear before a judge and start getting needed services right away. A case manager will meet with the offender, determine his or her most pressing needs and connect them to psychiatric care, substance abuse treatment and other help. It's a carrot-and-stick approach that balances services with consequences for anyone who refuses treatment and continues to commit crime.

Recognizing that progress takes time, the court will use graduated sanctions for offenders who stumble on the road to recovery -- steadily growing in seriousness if the offender refuses to comply with treatment and re-offends. The proposed Community Justice Center builds upon the good work already being done by existing neighborhood-based community courts here in the city, where residents have a say in arbitrating neighborhood-specific offenses. That program -- which does not have a judge, a prosecutor or a public defender -- is much narrower in scope than the proposed Community Justice Center.

At the center, prosecutors, police, public defenders and treatment providers and community organizations will work together to get offenders back on the road to recovery. The center will make justice speedier and more visible to the community and enforcement stronger and more certain. There's substantial evidence that this type of model works. It's working in New York City, where the Midtown Community Court is credited with reducing lower-level crime throughout Manhattan and cleaning up Times Square. In New York, this approach has saved money, improved public safety and streamlined the process of connecting offenders with treatment. Today, more than 30 cities in the United States have a version of a community court and 20 countries are developing their own models.

We believe San Francisco has a unique infrastructure and need for the Community Justice Center. That's why we are proposing to pilot this initiative in the Tenderloin and South of Market area, where more than a third of the city's quality-of-life offenses occur. Drawing upon the richness of our services, the commitment of our community partners, and the compassion of our residents, the center promises to give relief to the neighborhoods most affected by quality of life crimes.

The entire city is victimized when we accept business as usual. The time has come to try something new -- a method that has been proven to work in other cities. We owe it to the community, to the victims -- and to the offenders.

*Gavin Newsom is the mayor and Kamala D. Harris is the district attorney of San Francisco.*

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