

**REMARKS**

**OF**

**THE HONORABLE LAURIE ROBINSON  
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OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS**

**AT THE**

**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF COMMUNITY COURTS**

**ON**

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Thank you, Greg [Berman], and I'm just delighted to be here this morning. And I want to acknowledge my distinguished fellow speakers – Mayor Gray, Council Member Mendelson, and Judge Satterfield.

I'd like to thank Greg and Julius and all the Center for Court Innovation staff for bringing us together – and for their tremendous leadership in advancing community justice and problem-solving in the justice system.

And I want to thank all of you for your commitment to the ideals and principles represented by community courts. These principles – engaging the community, addressing offender behaviors, reducing crime, and ensuring fairness – these have become cardinal tenets of an effective system of justice. And you have been the leaders in delivering that message.

I've been involved in criminal justice policy now for some 40 years. I feel, in some ways, like I've seen it all. But as I reflect on everything that's happened over that time, and as I think about all the work I've been part of – and all the extraordinary people I've known – I consider one of the true highlights of my career to have worked with one of the real champions of community and problem-solving justice – my former boss, then-Attorney General Janet Reno.

In addition to being a remarkable leader, she was a personal mentor of mine – someone I admire so much because she recognized the potential of the justice system to effect real change. Attorney General Eric Holder – another strong believer in community justice – shares my respect – in fact, he keeps the official Department of Justice portrait in his office. Sadly, as you may know, she's no longer in good health, and the fact that she is now unable to be active in criminal justice is a loss for me and for all of us who work in this field.

But her legacy remains strong, and one of the biggest and, I think, most important parts of that legacy was her work to launch drug courts. It drove her to distraction to see substance abusers cycling in and out of the system without getting the help they needed. So she worked with dedicated people like Judge Stan Goldstein and Tim Murray, and they got that first drug court going in Miami. Together, they sparked a movement that – as you well know – has since taken root in communities all across this country.

Now, when I think back to my first term as Assistant Attorney General under Janet Reno in 1994 – the year the Crime Bill was passed – there were only 11 drug courts in the United States. So it's astonishing for me to think there are now more than 3,500 problem-solving courts in operation around the nation, and scores of others in countries across the globe.

It's been incredibly exciting for me to be part of this growth through the work OJP has done. But even more thrilling is to see the ingenuity this movement has generated in so many areas. And as I was thinking about my remarks today, I reflected

on how community courts, drug courts, mental health courts, reentry courts, and the rest really exemplify American innovation.

They bring together the grand tradition of the American legal system – with its dual concern for the dignity of the individual and the good of the whole – and the energy and boldness of problem solvers. This remarkable – and unusual – combination of foundational values and visionary ideals has served the cause of justice well.

But why has it worked? I'd argue there are three reasons: First, they rely on evidence; second, they depend on collaboration; and third, they seek to achieve what the system was designed to ensure – fairness for all.

Let's begin with this notion of evidence. When business owners, neighborhood activists, criminal justice agencies, and groups like CCI got together in the early 90s to create the Midtown Community Court – and by the way, when I first visited Midtown with John Feinblatt years ago, I just fell in love with it! – they recognized from the get-go that measuring outcomes was essential. They knew that what they were doing was untried and unproven – and there were a lot of skeptics. They knew if they couldn't show results, their model would never be anything more than a neat idea.

Of course, as we all know, the experiment was a success. An evaluation by the National Center for State Courts showed the Midtown Court helped reduce local crime and revive public trust in the system.

As someone who's always believed firmly in the role of science in guiding policy, I think your attention to evaluation is commendable – and I'd strongly encourage you to continue adding to the research literature. The fact is, although we have a growing body of knowledge about community courts and their impact, we need to know more.

For example, I think we need to look beyond individual offenders to examine the broader effect of these programs on communities. We need to know if these courts truly improve relationships between local residents and the justice system. We need to know if and how they affect social norms. And we need to know if they create incentives to obey the law.

I think the answers to these questions will be very useful to those who make decisions about how local resources are allocated. After all, the goal of research isn't just to satisfy our intellectual curiosity. In tough economic times, it's more important than ever that we be able to demonstrate that scarce public dollars are being used wisely and effectively.

That's why, last June, I was very pleased that OJP could launch a new resource for the field called [CrimeSolutions.gov](http://CrimeSolutions.gov). This is a new Web site – a “what works” clearinghouse – with more than 160 criminal and juvenile justice programs, including a number of specialized and problem-solving courts. Each one has a rating for effectiveness.

This is the kind of resource I think the field needs: The bottom line is that legislators, council members, county officials, and others are going to want to know if these programs can really keep offenders from returning to the system.

The second contributor to the success of community courts is their emphasis on collaboration. This ability to bring together a wide array of stakeholders is, I think, one of their greatest strengths.

If you visit the South Dallas Community Court, you'll find an entire community center offering a variety of services for both defendants and community residents – things like health care, job training, housing, and benefits assistance. These are the resources that help prevent individuals from returning to court again and again – and this type of coordination is typical of community courts.

One of the things community courts have helped us to see more clearly is the importance of informal social controls. People who work in the criminal justice system have always tended to focus on the threat of arrest and punishment, but the reality is, most people obey the law for other reasons – often because of pressure from family and peers.

In neighborhoods where these informal social controls are weak, disorder and crime reign, because delinquent behavior may be viewed as a sign of strength and incarceration can be seen, as we know, as a rite of passage. That's why it's so important we involve the community.

So a big part of our responsibility – and a central part of community justice – is to listen to residents – to hear their concerns and ideas, and to let them help set public safety priorities.

The third reason I think community courts have been successful – and why I think they will continue to matter – is their focus on making the justice system credible and relevant to the people it serves.

I'm so glad to see my friend Tom Tyler on the agenda here. Tom is one of the country's foremost experts on procedural justice, which is an issue that has long interested me. And Tom and I had the opportunity together to sit down with the Attorney General and talk about this issue back in 2009.

The idea of procedural justice centers on the questions like – what fuels a sense of fairness, and how does just treatment affect compliance with the law? Tom has shown that there's a very strong connection between being treated fairly (for example, by a police officer) and obeying the law – which makes a great deal of sense when you think about it. And I think community courts are already making a difference in advancing this notion.

Some community courts are doing this through architectural changes, like holding cells without bars and judicial benches that put judges and defendants on the same level. And some courts are doing it by providing opportunities for justice officials to interact with local residents at community events, baseball games, neighborhood clean-ups, and in other settings.

Going back to research, evidence suggests that these kinds of activities are capable of changing public opinion for the better. Take, for example, the Red Hook Community Justice Center in Brooklyn, which I had the opportunity to visit a number of years ago and was so impressed by. A range of services – from prevention to courtroom activities – is available, all under one roof.

When Red Hook was in the design stages, organizers engaged community residents, and their input helped guide planning. Researchers have found that almost 9 out of 10 defendants that come through Red Hook say their cases are handled fairly, regardless of the outcome of the case, which is pretty remarkable. This gets to the heart of procedural justice – when offenders feel like they’ve been treated with respect, they’re more likely to accept court decisions – even those that go against them.

Perceptions matter. It’s hard to convince people to obey the law if they don’t think of the system as legitimate and fair. And I think this is one of the real contributions of community justice.

You may have noticed early in my remarks that I spent some time thinking back and reflecting. As some of you may know, I’m stepping down from my position as Assistant Attorney General at the end of February. This wasn’t an easy decision – particularly in light of some of the exciting new developments in our field, the growth in community courts among them, and because I’ll miss working closely with people like Greg and Julius. But for a number of reasons, I decided it was the right time.

I’ll be handing the reins over to my wonderful colleague, Deputy Assistant Attorney General Mary Lou Leary, who not only has deep experience in the criminal justice system and the respect and ear of the Attorney General, but is also absolutely committed to community and problem-solving courts – and to the work all of you are doing.

I know she spoke at your first conference in October of 2010, so she’s no stranger to you – and she’s certainly no stranger to community justice. And I know many of you have also worked with Jim Burch, who used to lead our Bureau of Justice Assistance and now serves as OJP’s Deputy Assistant Attorney General. So rest assured, Mary Lou and Jim both share your vision for a justice system that operates on the principles of fairness, collaboration, and community engagement.

BJA’s current director, Denise O’Donnell, whom you’ll hear from on the final day, is also a strong supporter of problem-solving justice. And she’s got a dedicated and

talented staff – Kim Ball, in particular – helping to guide her office’s work in this area. You’ll find that, in Mary Lou, Jim, Denise, and Kim, you could have no better allies.

And although I’m leaving OJP, I’ll continue to follow your progress closely. The changes you’ve helped to bring about are too important for me to lose sight of, and the possibilities you’re creating will be exciting to watch.

I feel lucky to have been part of the growth of problem-solving courts, and I’m proud of the work OJP has done and continues to do to support you. We’ve developed, I think, an excellent partnership – one that will continue to bear fruit well into the future.

So thank you for your great work, continue to innovate, and keep your sights on the noble ends you serve. Thank you so much.

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