

Community court plan will tackle petty crime

Offenders will be offered service programs to help

BY RAFAEL OLMEDA STAFF WRITER

A Broward judge is calling for a new way to handle law breakers accused of petty infractions like panhandling, loitering and relieving themselves in public.

Chief Administrative Judge Jack Tuter said this week that it's time to stop dragging low-level offenders into court in handcuffs and throwing them in jail for a few days or slapping them with fines they can't pay. Instead, he wants to bring court to the people in their communities, with an offer of help.

"What we've been doing with these offenders hasn't been working," said Tuter, who is organizing Broward's first "community court," which he's hoping to kick off in Fort Lauderdale this fall. "We haven't been addressing the real issues that bring them into the justice system in the first place."

The planned community court overlaps with a larger strategy to confront homelessness in Fort Lauderdale, said Mayor Dean Trantalis.

"We want to change the landscape of our city by offering services that they need," he said. "By placing individuals in care programs according to their needs, we could dwindle the numbers of homeless."

Tuter has numerous models to work with. Community courts are in place in 77 cities, the first in Manhattan in the 1990s. Tuter said he is looking to the court in Eugene, Oregon, for inspiration.

In the west coast state, offenders in a specific geographic area are typically given notices to appear in court, but the hearing takes place in a public library, where service providers are waiting at tables ready to accept new clients for mental health, substance abuse counseling and other programs, according to the program's website.

"It's not the kind of thing we can do in a jail or in a courtroom," said Tuter. "It's something that we need to bring to the people."

While the planning is still in early stages, Tuter said he anticipates holding court at Fort Lauderdale City Hall for a pilot program. A judge will take cases one day a week, then

assign offenders to a service provider. About 15 offenders a week are expected.

“The services already exist,” said the mayor. “What we need is to coordinate our efforts so that instead of keeping them in jail for a night, we put them on track to get back on their feet.”

Michael Wright, administrator of Broward County’s Homeless Initiative Partnership, applauded the idea.

“I believe that the Community Court’s implementation has the potential to reduce incarceration and criminal records of persons experiencing homelessness who interact with the judicial system,” he said.

Another supporter is Broward Public Defender Howard Finkelstein, who has long advocated for changing the way the justice system handles the homeless.

“Many homeless people are dealing with mental illness and alcohol abuse,” he said. “Jailing them for a night isn’t going to make a difference in their lives and it’s not going to stop them from re-offending once they get out. We need to do something proactive.”

Offering services for offenders is the easy part, Tuter said. Getting the offenders to accept them is more complicated.

“We’re not naive,” said Tuter. “We know not everyone is going to show up. But they don’t always show up now. We need to help those willing to accept help.”

Tuter said he intends to keep the community court in place for two years before reviewing the results. The ultimate goal will be to expand to the rest of the county, he said.

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