

# Fact Sheet

Currently in planning, the Brownsville Community Justice Center seeks to reduce crime and the use of incarceration in Brownsville while at the same restoring local faith in the justice system.

The Justice Center is dedicated to building multiple off-ramps for local residents who come into contact with the justice system. The Justice Center will provide much-needed educational, occupational, social, and health services at nearly every stage of the justice process, from arrest to prosecution to sentencing to aftercare. No matter how someone encounters the Justice Center—whether it's a case diverted from prosecution or a mandate from a judge or an individual returning from incarceration—the goal is the same: to provide the kind of services and support that individuals need to become law-abiding members of society.

In performing this work, the Brownsville Community Justice Center will build on the track record of community courts in Red Hook, Midtown Manhattan, Harlem, and the Bronx that have been documented to reduce local crime, enhance public confidence in government, and reduce the use of jail sentences.

## The Challenge

Located in central Brooklyn, Brownsville has not experienced the same public safety gains that the rest of New York City has enjoyed over the past 20 years. A recent *New York Times* story about the neighborhood was headlined “Where Optimism Feels Out of Reach.” Brownsville has the highest concentration of public housing of any neighborhood in the country, with more than 18 different developments. In recent years, it has also earned the distinction of being the most violent neighborhood in the city as well as the neighborhood with the most stop-and-frisk encounters.

To establish a baseline for future evaluation efforts, researchers from the Center for Court Innovation conducted a neighborhood survey, asking 815 community members about crime and other topics. More than 70 percent of local residents said that guns are a big problem in the neighborhood. And only 21 percent reported that the court system was effective in dealing with crime in the community.

## The Idea

Responding to these conditions, the Brownsville Community Justice Center will be a neighborhood-based court that will work with a variety of justice system-involved populations, including individuals with low-level criminal and family court cases, probationers, and parolees. When fully operational, the Justice Center will be an official branch of the New York State Court System, with a full-time judge dedicated to the project. The judge will have a broad array of community-based sanctions at his disposal, including community service, drug treatment, job training, and counseling. The idea is to link individuals to the services and supports they need to avoid becoming recidivists. In addition to a courtroom that will emphasize solving problems, the Brownsville Community Justice Center will make a major investment in crime prevention.

## Current Projects

While planning is underway for the courthouse, the Brownsville Community Justice Center has already begun to implement programs to enhance the quality of life in the community.

**Youth Court:** The Brownsville Youth Court, launched in May 2011, trains young people to hear actual cases involving their peers, such as assault, truancy, graffiti, and fare evasion. Instead of going through the traditional justice system, young people appear before the youth court where they are given sanctions meant to repair the harm their actions caused and are linked to local services to help them avoid further contact with the justice system. Each year, the Brownsville Youth Court handles more than 150 cases and trains more than 60 young people. More than 90 percent of the participants complete their sanctions—community restitution, letters of apology, links to social services—as ordered.

**Probation:** The New York City Department of Probation has a team of six probation officers in Brownsville as part of the Neighborhood Opportunity Network (NeON) initiative. As part of this effort, the Brownsville Community Justice Center is working to connect men and women from the ages of 16 to 24 who have been in contact with the criminal justice system in the last 12 months to resources such as GED and college assistance, internships, and professional training. In addition, participants complete community benefit projects, including cleaning up the property at Cedar Lane Stables with the help of the Federation of Black Cowboys, helping run a Youth Opportunity Fair, and assisting with the construction of a community teaching garden.

**Fighting Gun Crime:** With support from the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, the Brownsville Community Justice Center is helping to bring together law enforcement and key community players to send a message that

violence is not acceptable. The centerpiece of the initiative will be a series of “call-in” forums, where participants with criminal justice involvement (e.g. parolees, probationers) meet face-to-face with small groups of justice agency representatives and community leaders.

**Community Service:** Supervised work crews are repairing conditions of disorder in Brownsville. Projects include park clean-ups, graffiti removal, and responses to other neighborhood eye-sores that are reported by community residents—maintaining Pitkin Avenue, cleaning up Betsy Head Park, and working at community gardens.

**Juvenile Reentry Task Force:** Funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, this task force seeks to work with the Crossroads Juvenile Center to offer case management and support to smooth the reentry of young people into the community.

**Safe Surrender:** Safe Surrender is a joint project of the Brownsville Community Justice Center, New York State Court System, Kings County D.A.’s Office, Legal Aid, and local churches that helps local residents get outstanding warrants vacated.

**Partners:** The Brownsville Community Justice Center was endorsed by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg in his 2011 State of the City address. Other key supporters include New York State Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman and Brooklyn District Attorney Charles J. Hynes. Local partners include: the Brownsville Partnership, Community Partnership Commission Association, SCO Family Services, the Brownsville Recreation Center, and the Brooklyn Clergy Task Force. Support for planning and programming has come from the New York State Court System, Skadden Arps, Brooklyn Community Foundation, Stella and Charles Guttman Foundation, the U.S. Department of Justice, the New York City Department of Probation, and David Rockefeller Foundation.

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