

9/30/11

Court hopes community service has impact on minor lawbreakers

Those who commit minor crimes are given a chance to learn about their city -- and how they can help it

How can an arrest for drinking on the street become a teachable moment, or a trespassing bust evolve as a lesson in chaos theory?

What does a public indecency rap have to do with the butterfly effect, anyway?

Public officials, professional athletes and others who commit minor crimes find out in the Community Court of Indianapolis.

"These misdemeanors, this little lawbreaking, affects more than you personally," Superior Court Judge David Certo said. "It has a cumulative impact on the whole community."

That's the message the court has hammered home for 10 years. The only program of its kind in Indiana, Community Court -- anchored in Fountain Square -- assigns community service to misdemeanor offenders who plead guilty. It also plunks those offenders before a citizens "impact panel" so they learn the larger ramifications of their petty crimes.

"We give them anecdotes so they see the big picture," said Michael Hurst, program director of the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention and a regular panel member.

Community Court has a criminal and environmental branch, two small courtrooms and two holding cells. It has gained popularity since 2001, when 3,165 hours of community service were assigned.

Last year, court officials doled out nearly 30,000 hours, worth \$217,050 in labor to the community, said Jason Cochran, the court coordinator.

"The people who've come through here run the gamut," Certo said. "We've had pro football players to firefighters to young professionals."

They include former Bureau of Motor Vehicles Commissioner Andrew Miller, who was sentenced to filing work for an indecent exposure charge, and five undocumented students who were arrested during a highly publicized Statehouse protest in May.

The first community court was in New York City in 1993, and about 30 others have opened across the country since then, according to the website [www. courtinnovation.org](http://www.courtinnovation.org).

The Community Court of Indianapolis celebrated its anniversary with an open house Thursday, as county officials (current and former); judges (including an Indiana Supreme Court justice); and police officials stopped in to congratulate its workers.

On Virginia Avenue, where the court is located, the participants are told how being drunk and disorderly on Maryland Street tarnishes Downtown's image; how getting into a fight at a bar on Meridian Street could mean trouble for a viable business; or how painting graffiti on a garage on the Southeastside degrades a neighborhood and can lower property values.

"I ask shoplifters why there aren't any grocery stores in the some of the poorer neighborhoods," Hurst said. "Well, it's because there is so much shoplifting. And what's the impact of that? It means a grandmother on a fixed income has to take a bus or depend on a ride to go three miles just to get some groceries."

Rick McElroy, 50, was arrested four times last summer for drinking on Downtown streets and has done about 16 hours of community service each time. Thursday, he cleaned the courtroom and the grounds outside. Previously, he's sorted canned goods at Gleaners Food Bank of Indiana.

Despite his relapses, McElroy, who is homeless, said the messages of impact panels are slowly sinking in.

"I've been a drinker my whole life and until now I never thought I was hurting anyone but myself," he said. "But I can see how it isn't good for the city or Downtown."

The Community Court was the brainchild of Scott Newman, former Marion County prosecutor and Indianapolis public safety director.

"When I worked in municipal court, it was like measured insanity," Newman said. "It didn't serve anyone. It didn't serve the cops who felt these cases just went through and were forgotten. It didn't serve the victims, who got nothing, and it didn't serve the prosecutors, who got frustrated.

"I thought this would be a good model for us in Indianapolis because we are a helpful, engaged community."

Call Star reporter John Tuohy at (317) 444-6303.