



San Diego City Attorney Jan I. Goldsmith

NEWS RELEASE

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Misdemeanor Program Hits Milestone: 25,000 Hours of Community Service

Community Justice Initiative participants pay debts to society, avoid criminal convictions

More than 25,000 hours of community service were performed in the first two years of the Community Justice Initiative, a program in which low-level misdemeanor offenders pay their debts to society by assisting with homeless services or by cleaning and beautifying San Diego neighborhoods.

CJI reached the 25,000-hour milestone earlier this month as it celebrated its two-year anniversary.

The program was launched by City Attorney Jan Goldsmith to provide early intervention in the lives of misdemeanor offenders who otherwise get no personal attention from the criminal justice system.

Participants perform 16 hours of community service through one of two non-profit service providers, Alpha Project and Urban Corps of San Diego County, after which their misdemeanor conviction is removed from their records. In all, 1,583 participants have completed the program, compiling 25,328 hours of community service.

“The benefits of this community service can be seen throughout our city, measured in trees that are planted, graffiti that is removed, dumped items that are hauled away, and support given to programs that help the homeless,” Goldsmith said. **“But CJI’s true success has always come from helping these low-level offenders – many of them young adults – get their lives on a better track before they commit violent offenses or become career criminals.”**

“I am grateful for our outstanding CJI partners who share this important goal, and for the members of my staff who manage the program. Together we found a way to transform criminal behavior into an opportunity, one that can benefit the offenders as well as the community,” Goldsmith said.

City Attorney-elect Mara W. Elliott, who will succeed Goldsmith next month, is committed to expanding CJI, which was launched in 2014 as a pilot program called Community Court.

“By applying principles of restorative justice to these cases, the Community Justice Initiative improves the lives of the offender as well as the quality of life in neighborhoods where the crimes were committed. It’s no wonder that CJI is recognized, both locally and nationally, as a model for others to follow,” Elliott said.

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Through Urban Corps, CJI participants plant trees, recycle waste products, paint out graffiti, and clear neighborhoods of illegally dumped trash. Through Alpha Project, they assist in the operations of Alpha Square and provide services to the homeless.

Other CJI partners include the San Diego County Sheriff's Department, the Office of the Public Defender, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), and the American Civil Liberties Union.

In its first year, CJI had 602 participants who performed nearly 10,000 hours of community service.

At the start of its second year, CJI expanded under a two-year \$415,599 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Smart Prosecution Initiative, which assists local jurisdictions in preventing and reducing crime.

The goal of the Smart Prosecution Initiative is to develop a body of knowledge about innovative, best-practices, and evidenced-based strategies so they can be emulated by other agencies.

With funds from that grant, the City Attorney's Office hired a CJI coordinator who screens participants to determine their risk level. Participants who score medium- to high-risk are then screened by the Sheriff's department to determine their individual needs (such as housing, education, job training and treatment programs) that may put them at risk of committing additional crimes

A dedicated case manager then provides medium- to high-risk participants with personal counseling and assistance in accessing to service providers and enrolling in treatment programs

In June 2016, CJI received the Public-Private Partnership of the Year award from the San Diego County Taxpayers Association.

The award recognized the savings that has resulted from reduced court dates and court appearances by law-enforcement witnesses. CJI participants appear in court only once, where they enter a guilty plea and accept a CJI offer. After completing the program, they do not need to return to court to have the conviction removed from their record.

The Taxpayers Association praised CJI for, among other things, allowing the City Attorney's Office to focus on bigger and more serious crimes.

Last month, the City Attorney's Office hired a Program Manager to oversee CJI's planning and partnerships, conduct technical and statistical analyses of the program, and seek grant funds to sustain CJI and other alternative sentencing programs.

CJI is one of many alternative sentencing programs and collaborative courts run from the City Attorney's Neighborhood Prosecution & Collaborative Courts Unit, which is led by Chief Deputy City Attorney Lara Easton. Others include the Beach Area Community Court, the Prostitution Impact Panel, Homeless Court, Behavioral Health Court, Drug Court, and Veterans Treatment Court.

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