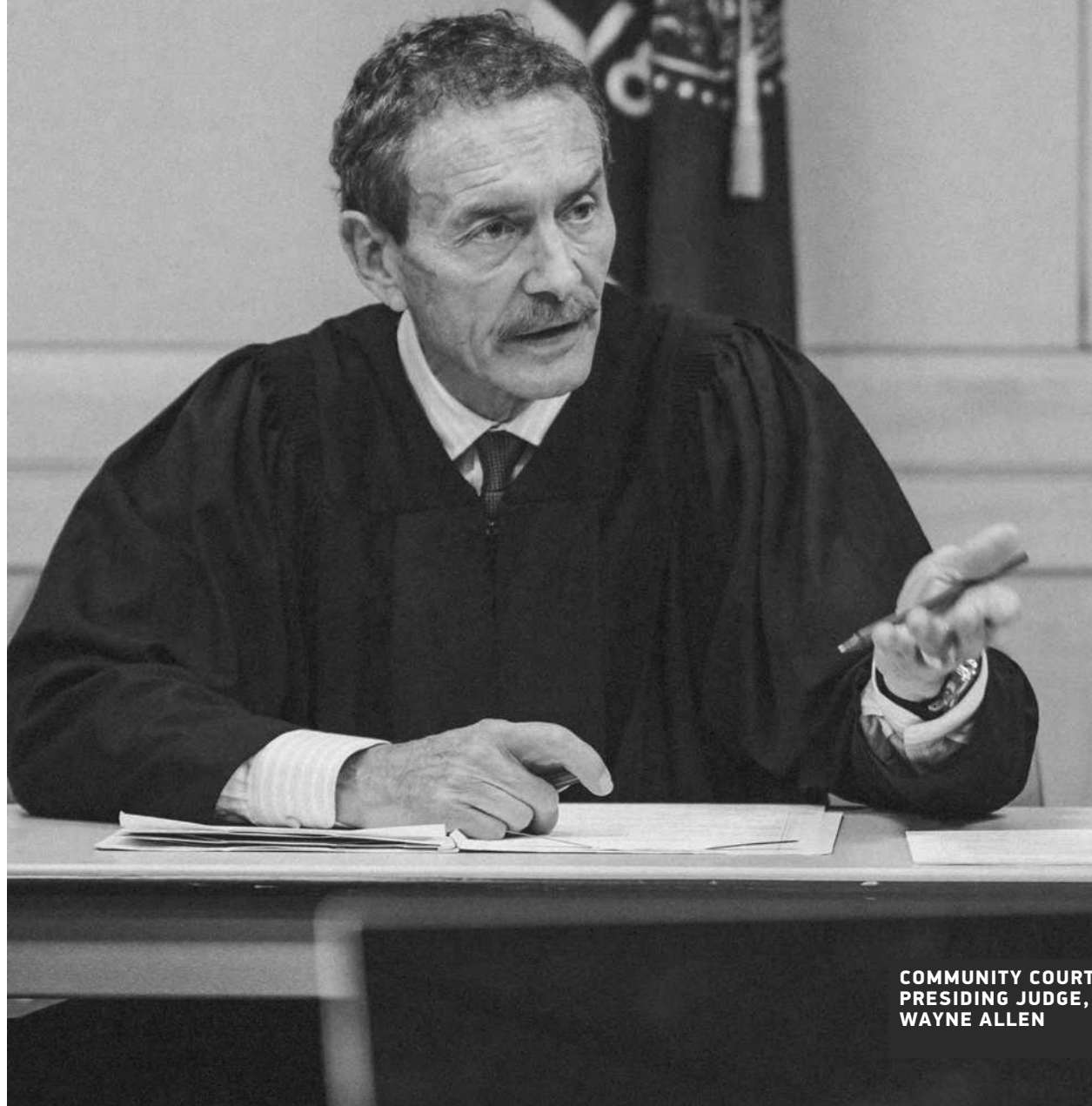


# Courting the ones who need it

## COMMUNITY COURT SEEKS TO SUPPORT RATHER THAN SENTENCE

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COMMUNITY COURT'S  
PRESIDING JUDGE,  
WAYNE ALLEN

PHOTO: TODD COOPER

**J**osh Beals says he doesn't remember getting the citations that brought him to Eugene's Community Court — because he was, as he describes it, “on a vodka spree.” What he does remember is waking up in a field, with all his belongings stolen, and a fractured skull. That, he says, was his turning point.

Ten months after the incident, as he stood for the second time before a judge, a group of lawyers and a collection of other defendants, he hoped it would be the last time he found himself on the wrong side of the law.

Beals has been through the paces of the court system several times before. He's even been in this particular courtroom, an otherwise nondescript room on the ground floor of the Eugene Public Library.

Reoffending was never part of his plan, but alcoholism and chronic homelessness kept him on a path that eventually led him to a court hearing — a path that he now says he's ready to leave behind.

“My life sucks a hell of a lot less than it did. So if you want your life to suck less, too, you should try it,” he told the other participants in the room.

Beals is one of a growing number of people — most of them homeless — cited for nonviolent minor crimes in Eugene, some for the fifth or fiftieth or even the hundredth time. Rather than spending a few days in the Lane County Jail and going back out to the streets, however, some defendants are opting to enter the Eugene Community Court program. It's an initiative of Eugene's Municipal Court, which typically handles these types of violations.

Eugene city and court officials decided to use this program a few years ago to support frequent offenders with their underlying needs rather than punishing them repeatedly. According to the court's most recent report at the end of July, it had produced 40 “graduates” who, like Beals, have completed their assigned community service and worked with local service providers to deal with contributing factors to their violations.

“What we look for is, where are the people who want to make a change?” says Wayne Allen, the presiding judge and one of the core team members who launched the initiative in September 2016. “We want to integrate as opposed to exclude people.”

The court takes a two-pronged approach to changing the way the misdemeanor trial process typically works. First, participants agree to enter a guilty plea in order to get connected with resources, such as housing or mental health services. Then, instead of jail time, they perform community service, usually in the area where they were cited.

“In your traditional court process you never try to address the underlying issues,” Municipal Court Administrator Cheryl Stone says. “People might have road crew or community service or serve some jail time, but nobody ever says you're going to get some treatment or you're going to give back to the community in a different way.”

### IDENTIFYING THE PATH TO EFFECTIVENESS

Stone and Allen began shaping their idea for a community court in Eugene in 2013. They shared a mutual desire to find a way to deal with Eugene's overwhelming amount of low-level, “quality of life” crime downtown.

They started by getting community feedback with help from the Center for Court Innovation, a national organization based in Manhattan that would later help fund the Eugene court. The city circulated a survey asking how community members perceived safety in a few areas of town.

According to the results, almost half of respondents indicated that they felt the area around the downtown bus station was “unsafe” or “somewhat unsafe.”

Stone used the 900 or so responses to determine the geographic boundaries for eligibility to participate in Community Court. The boundaries included the Lane Transit District bus station, the Eugene Public Library, Lane Community College downtown campus and even-