



**COMMUNITY COURT SEEKS TO TURN THINGS AROUND FOR PEOPLE LIKE JOSH BEALS**

PHOTO: TODD COOPER

tually the entire downtown police patrol area.

Stone says they realized as they collected feedback on the court that a larger area needed to be included to catch the problems — and people — of greatest concern.

When someone is cited with a misdemeanor in this zone, as Beals was, they are first routed to Municipal Court. But if the judge believes the defendant is a better candidate for Community Court, they'll refer them to the program. That person then has to appear at the court at least once during its Friday sessions.

People can opt out of the Community Court, choosing to do their time or pay their fine. Those who want to participate meet with a case manager who monitors them throughout the one to three months they're in the program.

The community court assesses participants based on a list of "criminogenic" needs — circumstances that help determine a person's likelihood of committing a misdemeanor offense, such as an anti-social personality, a criminal history or close connections with other anti-social peers. This helps the case manager decide what length of program to assign the defendant and which service providers to connect them with.

"The idea is that if you treat criminogenic needs," Stone says, "then it will reduce future recidivism."

In Beals' case, his past criminal history made him eligible to be in a longer-track program. But his independent motivation to get himself into treatment — he had already connected with Outpatient Rehab before coming to community court — helped expedite his court time.

"I knew I needed extra help," Beals says. "I was tired of being a homeless bum holding a sign on the street."

### A NATIONWIDE EFFORT

The Eugene court bases its intake practices, including risk assessment, on recommendations from the Center for Court Innovation (CCI). The organization focuses on criminal justice reform and partners with state and federal bodies such as the Bureau of Justice to administer grants to community courts.

Eugene was one of 11 recipients nationwide of a \$200,000 grant in 2016 from the CCI, which funds the salaries of the

court's case manager and clerk.

The CCI is a product of the first community court in the United States, which started in midtown Manhattan in 1993. It was so effective that the community court concept spread across the region, the nation and the world. In 2016 the CCI reported that there were 37 such courts across the United States.

Each varies in the scope of treatments offered, according to the participating city's needs. Several features of the Eugene court are modeled after community courts in Brooklyn and Spokane. Like Spokane, Eugene holds Community Court once a week in its downtown library. In addition to supplying services to defendants, providers also help anyone who chooses to walk in.

But it can be difficult to gauge the effectiveness of community courts, at least by comparing them to one another.

Brett Taylor, the liaison between the Eugene court and the CCI, says this is both the value and the difficulty of community courts. "It's not a cookie-cutter formula," Taylor says.

The Eugene Community Court says it hasn't collected enough data to determine whether it is upholding a meaningful community-wide standard.

According to Judge Allen, success isn't measured by whether someone gives up drinking or is in permanent housing by the time they graduate from the court. Even if someone shows up drunk one week but sober the next, he says, the court may see success in their progress.

"I'm sure people would like us to be more effective," he says. "I'd like to be more effective."

### NOT A SIMPLE FIX

Housing is one of the most critical and difficult aspects of the court's goals. ShelterCare works with the Eugene Community Court to try to get people on a county waitlist for housing referrals.

Many people who come through Community Court don't qualify as "chronically homeless." To fall into that category, a person has to have been homeless for more than one year, says Melissa McCloskey, housing and services navigator for ShelterCare.

"A lot of times we'll get people that come in and they've been homeless 10 months or something, or they just became homeless a couple months ago, and we have to be like, 'Sorry, we can't even do an assessment with you,'" she says. "Which really sucks because a lot of times the people that have only been homeless a month just need a little boost and they'll be right back into life mode again."

Eugene's lack of affordable housing isn't the only problem. Advocates frequently say the city has impeded homeless people by criminalizing their behavior. A 2015 ban on camping within city limits and, this past April, a ban on dogs in the downtown area were both criticized for their impacts on those without housing.

A June *Eugene Weekly* article ("Criminalizing Homelessness," June 1) revealed clear discrepancies in how often homeless people are being cited: One in four people ticketed for a minor crime in 2016 was experiencing homelessness.

Advocates and homeless people alike say many of these tickets are for behavior necessary for survival, even for sleeping. White Bird Clinic's Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS) team is one alternative the city and Eugene Police Department rely on. EPD also implemented a Community Outreach Response Team: downtown patrol officers working with "frequent fliers" to try to divert them into treatment.

These efforts are seen as complementary to the Community Court, and housing is frequently a core issue among the people reached by any of them.

After Community Court participants do their housing assessment, they go back to their current living situation; often, that means returning to the streets. McCloskey says some people referred to a housing program couldn't be tracked down. If participants don't respond quickly enough, they lose their spot.

The housing referrals are also challenging; often, McCloskey says, participants show up under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

"It sounds like it shouldn't be that difficult, but I would say half of the people we meet with there, it is a challenge to get through it and keep them on topic," she says.

Longtime advocate for the homeless Majeska Seese-Greene says the Community Court "seems to be a pretty good program."

But, she adds, "I also do not think it addresses the criminalization issue. It hasn't done anything to change the ordinances that basically make it illegal to be alive and breathing if you don't have a place to stay overnight in Eugene."

For now, the Eugene Community Court is still young, but the grant is already halfway spent. Staff members are counting on the support of the Eugene City Council to secure enough funding to continue once the grant expires next year.

Stone and Allen both say they are confident the council will at least meet the current funding level. City Councilor Emily Semple of Ward 1, where the Community Court is located, confirmed that the court is on the council's budget radar.

"I'm sure that a motion will be made to continue it because I would make it," she says. "\$100,000 or \$200,000 is not a small amount, but for the benefits we reap, it's a bargain."

Semple says the council has not looked at any data on the court yet but expects to when budget discussions begin again.

The court, meanwhile, is hoping to expand. They want more stories like Beals' — they say even if you come back twice, as long as you get help, the community benefits.

Beals, for his part, now has a job to get to instead of jail time to serve. His criminal record is three violations cleaner than it might have been, he's working towards permanent housing and he's also attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings every week.

"Once I'm done with court, I'm done with court," Beals says. ■

*This story was developed as part of the Catalyst Journalism Project at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. Catalyst brings together investigative reporting and solutions journalism to spark action and response to Oregon's most perplexing issues. To learn more visit [journalism.uoregon.edu/catalyst](http://journalism.uoregon.edu/catalyst) or follow the project on Twitter @UO\_catalyst.*