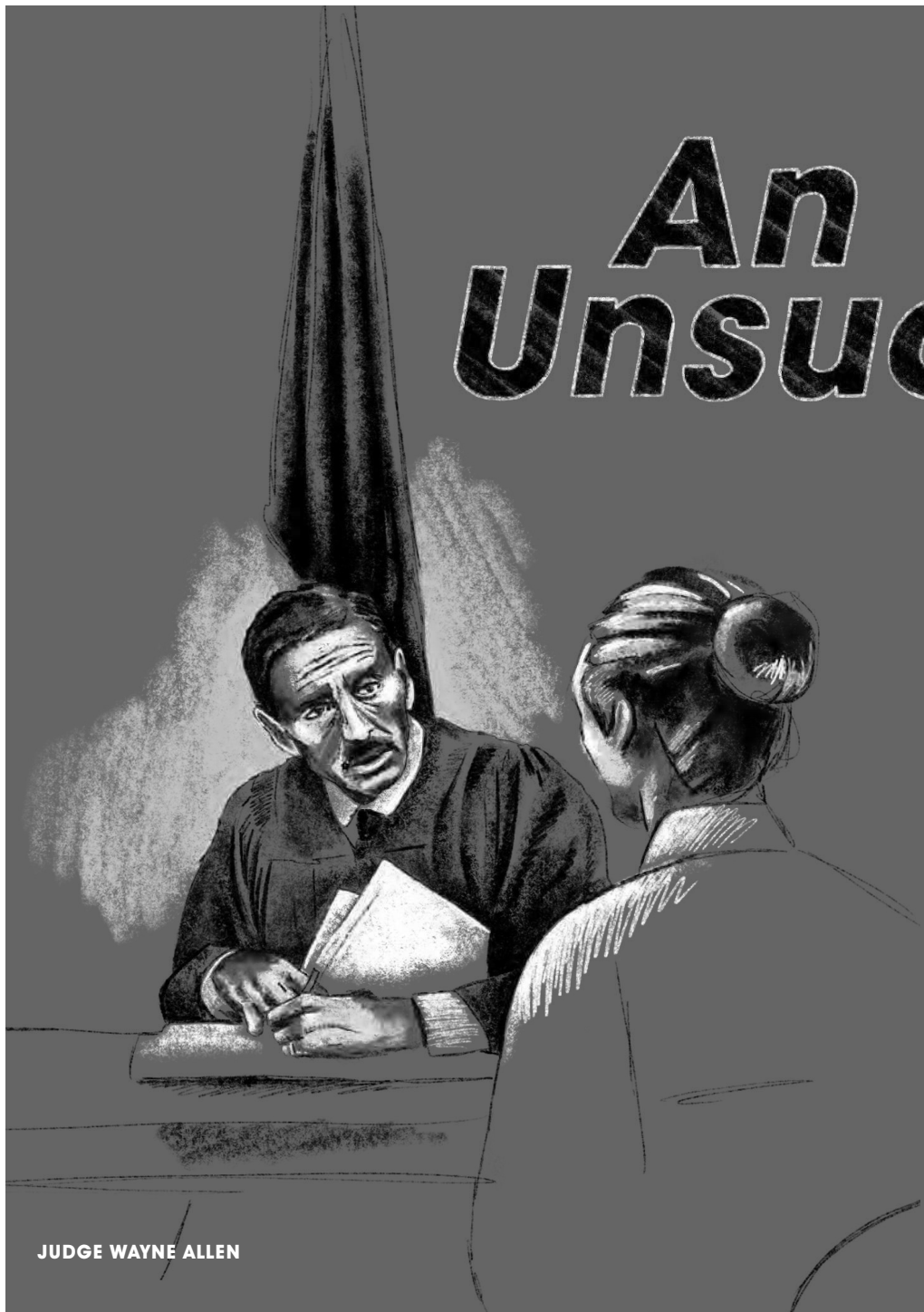


An Unsuccessful Solution



JUDGE WAYNE ALLEN

City officials claim Community Court has brought about big changes in the way Eugene treats the homeless.

The court's own numbers tell a very different story.

BY TAYLOR PERSE
AND MORGAN THEOPHIL

ILLUSTRATION BY CHELSEA LOVEJOY

Two years ago the city of Eugene, with much fanfare, announced it would do more to help the homeless and others who are repeatedly arrested and ticketed by Eugene police for small-time crimes.

The idea is called Community Court, which gives defendants a way to avoid fines and jail time by enrolling in a program that connects them with mental health services, housing and ways to find work.

City officials predicted that Eugene's new Community Court would also help clear the city's Municipal Court of so-called "frequent flyer" offenders whose repeated crimes and misdemeanors cost taxpayers.

"This is a way to reduce the costs, and benefit, we hope, the people that find themselves caught up in these kind of behaviors," City Manager Jon Ruiz said at the time.

City officials have since claimed the program is working. "The people who have engaged and opted into the program have very positive stories and positive things to say," Cheryl Stone, the city's court administrator who led the effort to create the program, tells *Eugene Weekly*.

Stone also says that Community Court tends to reduce the number of people cycling back through the courts.

But the court's own records reveal that might not be the case.

Data from the city's courts show the recidivism rate — how often people reoffend after being convicted of crimes — has not changed for those who have successfully completed the Community Court program, according to an analysis done by *EW* and the Catalyst Journalism Project at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication.

The results raise serious questions about the effectiveness of the program, which the city helped pay for with a

\$200,000 U.S. Department of Justice grant.

The numbers also raise questions about the veracity of statements made by city officials about Community Court and their unwillingness to release public records that shed more light on what's really happening with the program.

Our analysis tracked nearly 800 defendants eligible for Community Court between September 2016 and the end of June 2018, when the federal grant ran out.

The analysis shows Eugene's Community Court program has fallen short of its promise:

- Very few people complete the program. Records show only 17 percent of defendants eligible for Community Court have had their charges dismissed by "graduating" the court after staying out of trouble for a period of time, performing community service and checking in with organizations that can hook them up with the services they may need.

- Nearly 30 percent of people who completed the Community Court program have since been convicted in the city's courts, a recidivism rate far higher than city officials have made public. In fact, these Community Court graduates are being convicted of crimes at the same rate as before they entered the program.

- Overall, Community Court isn't reaching the people who need it most. Defendants who failed in the program or simply opted out are showing up in court more often, creating an even bigger caseload than before.

THE HOMELESS IN COURT

Eugene faces a homelessness crisis, and the city has responded by turning many people without permanent addresses into criminals.

Only about 1 percent of the city's population is home-

less, yet 25 percent of the cases the city's Municipal Court prosecutes for non-driving violations are against people without permanent addresses, as an *EW* investigation revealed last year.

Police reports and court records show some of these charges include assaults and other crimes, but others include violations are for sleeping in parks, "loitering" under cover while it rains or other simple actions many homeless people take to simply survive their day.

The Municipal Court can order jail time or levy fines that often stack up into the thousands of dollars — debts many homeless will never be able to pay.

City officials realized the Eugene Municipal Court was dealing with the end result of a deeper community problem and that the traditional approach of levying fines or sending people to jail wasn't working.

"It's just a step that ends the case," Municipal Court Judge Wayne Allen tells *EW*. "It doesn't end the problem. We're trying to see if we can end the problem."

Searching for a solution, Eugene officials looked to Spokane, which has been operating a community court since 2013. In 2016, Eugene was one of 10 cities chosen by the Center for Court Innovation, a New York-based nonprofit, to receive \$200,000 federal grants to set up community court programs.

The Eugene court deals with offenders accused of committing non-violent, minor crimes and violations within the entire downtown police patrol area in Eugene. Defendants who qualify for the Community Court can opt in to the program rather than go through the traditional Municipal Court process.

Each defendant in Community Court is given an individual case plan that outlines what they need to accomplish in order to graduate the program and avoid conviction, jail