

# **CALIFORNIA HOMELESS COURTS**

November 13, 2003

## **Introduction**

The Administrative Office of the Court's Collaborative Justice Unit held the first in a series of conference calls with California Homeless Courts. The participating courts provided summaries of program development and case processing strategies that were effective in their courts.

## **Alameda County**

The Alameda Homeless Court has informally participated in the past two bi annual (every two years) Veteran's Stand Down events. The court began exploring the question of homelessness and quality of life infractions and misdemeanors that clutter the court's calendars and learned that the County of Alameda was conducting the first ever census of homeless persons in March 2003. They made contact with those conducting the study and invited them to attend the court's community focused court planning committee meetings to update the committee on the study's progress. Based on the Veteran's stand down experience and information from the study, they decided to explore creating a homeless court. Alameda anticipates having their first homeless court session as early as March 2004 likely to be held in a shelter in Oakland. The pace and scope of the project depend upon a number of factors, mostly revolving around the availability of voluntary resources.

## **Kern County**

Prior to opening their homeless court, which started as a Stand down Court in 1999, Kern conducted a site visit with the San Diego Homeless Court. Kern works closely with the Greater Bakersfield Legal Aid and the Homeless Court Shelter. Homeless Court sessions are conducted every two months with approximately 20 people in each session. There are three judges that oversee the homeless court – one for the Stand down and 2 for the Homeless Court. Kern reported that nearly 40% of the homeless are veterans.

The Second Annual Homeless Court Conference will be held on January 30 in Bakersfield. For more information, contact Greater Bakersfield Legal Services at 661-325-5943.

## **Los Angeles**

Similar to Kern County, Los Angeles conducted a site visit to the San Diego Homeless Court prior to opening their court. The Los Angeles Homeless Court operates out of the Ninth Circuit Court through the City Attorney's Office. They have handled a total of 500 cases since the court opened in November 2000. The court operates 23 sessions every month at different shelter locations. Los Angeles does not have the funds or staff to

develop a follow-up program nor do they have the funding to track outcomes. The court would like to develop a system for statistical reporting for clients who re-offend.

### **Orange County**

Orange County conducted site visits to Los Angeles, San Diego and Venture prior to opening their homeless court in October 2003. They developed a needs assessment by surveying county shelters. The court accepts misdemeanors and other infractions during their monthly sessions.

### **San Diego**

The San Diego Homeless Court started in 1989 and is conducted on a monthly basis. On average the court sees 35-40 clients per month on a full range of misdemeanors, including DUI, sleeping in public and traffic related infractions. San Diego is starting to negotiate with their district attorney, an addition to the city attorney with whom they normally collaborate. Increasingly local programs involved in the homeless court are reporting back to the court about the status of clients. Client tracking is usually conducted anecdotally although the city attorney does track who returns to the court and why. Clients are expected to complete community service which is anything considered positive, i.e. life skills training, 12-step programs or anger management. San Diego has just completed a second video through the American Bar Association.

### **Santa Clara**

The Santa Clara Outreach Court opened in January 2003. The court is called an outreach rather than a homeless court to dispel the demeaning quality of homelessness. They hold sessions during the first Saturday of the month at the city's largest homeless shelter. Sessions are held with the judge, public defender and district attorney with an average of 30-40 participants. The Outreach Court includes 12 participating shelters which include 20 different referral agencies. Lunch is also served which boosts client attendance. The court has processed 400 cases since January 2003. The court is primarily interested in clearing outstanding warrants and saving money for the court. Secondly, the court recognizes that the program improves the quality of life for the client.

### **Ventura**

The Ventura Court opened three years ago and is conducted through various agencies that serve the homeless. The court averages 50 cases per session every other month. The cases are calendared only if the client has started community service. Ventura does track their cases through the assistance of a work-study student. The student tracks each case with the guidance of the social worker through the originating referral agency. Like other California homeless courts, Ventura operates their court with a minimal of funding.