Where People Live

Probation goes back to the neighborhood.

BY ABIGAIL KRAMER

THE MOST IMMEDIATELY remarkable thing about the waiting room of New York City's first neighborhood-based probation office, opened last December in Brownsville, Brooklyn, is the lack of waiting that takes place there. On a recent Tuesday morning, just one probationer sat with her back to the wall. The toddler on her lap had barely begun to squirm before the woman's officer appeared, took the baby in her arms and led her client to an office. Two teenaged boys came next, their fitted caps matching their hightops. One filled out paperwork while the other checked Facebook on a computer at the side of the room. During their 20 minutes in the office, three staff members stopped to ask if they were okay.

The Brownsville office is one of five community-based sites that the Department of Probation (DOP) opened in the past year, each located in a neighborhood with exceptionally high rates of criminal justice involvement. The others are in Harlem, Jamaica, Queens, South Bronx and Staten Island.

The sites, which the department calls Neighborhood Opportunity Networks, or NeONs, carry smaller caseloads than the agency's traditional model of a single, centralized office in each borough. The offices are co-located with community-based organizations and city-run service agencies (the Brooklyn office sits in the Brownsville Multiservice Center, which houses a mix of public agencies and nonprofits), making it easier for probation officers to connect their clients to services that might help them get on their feet.

So far, only the Harlem office works with teens younger than age 16, although that is in the plan for the others. A core focus in all of the NeON offices is men between ages 16 and 24, many of whom participate in mentoring, internship and education programs related to City Hall's Young Men's Initiative.

Neighborhood offices present logistical advantages to probationers: Reporting close to home means saving travel money, and makes it easier to organize appointments around jobs and families. But city officials say the NeONs are part of something bigger than convenience—they're one piece of an effort to re-imagine probation's role in people's lives.

"In the past, too much focus has been put on compliance," says Probation Commissioner Vincent Schiraldi. "We're looking at ways we can change that, focus more on clients' needs and connect them to resources that will continue to benefit them after we're out of their lives."

Getting people engaged in community organizations is ultimately good for public safety, says Schiraldi. "Our clients tend to hang out with people who are bad influences. We've got plenty of evidence to tell us that people who are involved with their communities in positive ways bust fewer windows and steal fewer cars."

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The vision for the NeONs rests on two propositions: First, that rehabilitation is in part a collective process, because probationers tend to build more stable lives if they have connections with social service programs, religious congregations, and other community-centered institutions. And second, that in doing its job as a rehabilitative agency, the DOP has both the responsibility and the capacity to integrate itself into the communities that send the most people into the justice system.

This can be a complicated proposition in a neighborhood like Brownsville, which is infamous both for its high crime rates and for its residents' sometimes contentious relationship with police. One of the most fraught questions facing DOP as it attempts to settle in: Can a criminal justice agency be perceived as a partner, and not just another surveillance arm of a system that many community members regard with deep mistrust?

"Communities have traditionally been the recipients of justice services," says Clinton Lacey, DOP's deputy commissioner for adult services. "We're pushing to find opportunities for communities to be a partner, to play a role in deciding what this looks like. It's something we want to do with communities; not to them."

Lacey says he hopes to recruit a community advisory board of Brownsville residents and business owners. Once that's established, the plan is that groups of probationers will design their own service projects, then present their ideas to the board for input and approval—coming up with projects, as a result, that bring meaningful benefit to the communities where probationers live.

"We're doing everything we can to be open and transparent to the community," says Karen Armstrong, who directs the department's adult operations in Brooklyn. "That's one of the challenges, is getting the community to trust us. It takes time to build relationships."

When the office held its opening last winter, a group of protestors stood outside, led by Brownsville's City Councilmember Darlene Mealy. "They should be putting a youth center here," Mealy told *Politicker* on the day of the opening. "Give us something of hope not despair."

Mealy has since agreed to collaborate with the agency on educational forums for neighborhood residents, but other community activists still question the DOP's ability to be a beneficial force. "Having a probation office move in, it rein-

forces negative images of our young black males and females," says Julius Wilson, the director of People for Political and Economic Empowerment, which works with people transitioning out of the criminal justice system. "That space should be utilized to provide educational opportunities, job development programs, things that would facilitate positive change."

DOP is working with researchers at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Rutgers University to study the NeONs' impact on staff, clients and the community. The results of that study will help determine how big the NeON initiative ultimately grows, says department spokesperson Ryan Dodge. So far, the project's operational costs have come from shifting resources around within the department's existing $83 million budget. "As we expand the initiative, we expect any cost differentials to be offset by improved client outcomes," says Dodge.

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It would be hard to imagine a more compelling argument for a rehabilitative approach to probation than Sean Turner. He's 23 years old with a perpetual, gap-toothed smile and relentless charm—the kind of young person who holds doors for old ladies and helps mothers with their strollers.

Turner lives with his family in the Brownsville Houses, a 27-building public housing development that has occupied two square blocks of the neighborhood since the late 1940s (and just one of 18 public housing developments in Brownsville). His mother sent him to live with an aunt in New Jersey for most of high school, in the hope that he'd stay out of the trouble that, he says, is readily available in the neighborhood. "There's not a lot of positive things around here," he says. "No afterschool programs or anything. The easiest thing to fall into is gangs."

After graduating, Turner moved back to Brownsville and was working at Duane Reade when he was arrested for allegedly conspiring with a customer to use a stolen credit card. His judge put him on what's known as "interim probation," charging the DOP to monitor him for a year. If he stays out of trouble and gets a new job, his grand larceny charge—a potential felony—will be reduced to a violation. If he messes up, he could face jail time and a conviction that will stay on his record for the rest of his life.

Turner started probation at the DOP's main borough office, making the trip to downtown Brooklyn every two weeks. Between the commute, the security line and the wait, each check-in took most of a day, he says. His probation officer, Jason Jones, gave him the names of some career placement agencies, but he was on his own in his mission to get a job.

Then Jones transferred to the newly opened Brownsville site, taking Turner's case with him. At the NeON, Turner was able to enroll in a neighborhood-based job training program funded by DOP under the mayor's Young Men's Initiative. The program, called Community Justice, will eventually operate in each of the neighborhoods where DOP runs a NeON office, providing a mix of one-on-one case management and group education to youth aged 16-24 who've been involved in the justice system. The program pays participants a stipend to complete an internship that corresponds with their interests.

Turner says he likes the program, and the fact that it's co-located with DOP makes for a useful multi-task: When he stops by to fill out internship applications, he runs into Jones, who says he can squeeze him in for his mandatory reporting session. After a routine address and arrest check, they talk for a few minutes about Turner's grandmother, who died a few weeks ago, and about his prospects for an internship. "Sean has risen above a lot of things," says Jones. "The main thing is helping him stay on track, reinforce his positive decisions and make sure he doesn't lose that light."

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The last time they met, Turner had been hoping to work at a car repair shop. Now, he says, he's applying to a training program at the Bronx Zoo. Jones raises his eyebrows. "The zoo? Where did that come from?"

"Animals. That's my other passion," says Turner.

"Any animals?" asks Jones.

"Snakes, lizards, dogs, bears, ostriches, you name it."

Jones laughs and gives Turner good news: He's received his third consecutive good report on Turner's participation in the Community Justice job training program, and he's decided to recommend that Turner be let off probation early. Turner gives Jones a hug and thanks him for his help. "I see the system way different than before," he says. "Before, it was just something I needed to get through. Now I see it as something to get me help for the long run. Everybody falls down sometimes; they're the type to help you get back up."