

INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Chairperson Gonzalez and members of the Juvenile Justice Committee. I am Vincent Schiraldi, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Probation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the **Examination of NeONs and Their Impact on Youth on Probation**. I am joined by Clinton Lacey, Deputy Commissioner for Adult Operations, and Ana Bermudez, Deputy Commissioner for Juvenile Operations. I would also like to acknowledge all of the other DOP staff that we have in the room.

It has been nearly two years since I first testified before the City Council on the Neighborhood Opportunity Network (NeON). At that time, the first NeON, in Brownsville, had only been open for a week.

I am happy to report that we are currently operating six NeON offices, with a seventh ribbon-cutting scheduled for next week in Bedford-Stuyvesant. We are also operating seven NeON Satellites in cooperation with local community-based organizations. By the end of 2013, DOP will be serving 50 percent of medium and high-risk adult clients at a NeON office or NeON Satellite. Approximately half of all NeON clients are 16-24 years old.

I don't want to brag, but in my opinion two years is a remarkably short amount of time to have accomplished so much. That we were able to pull it off is testament to both the hard work of our staff and community partners, as well as the soundness of the two fundamental ideas behind the NeON:

- 1) DOP needs to have a meaningful presence in the communities where significant numbers of our clients live.
- 2) People on probation should have viable community alternatives to long-term government dependency.

Both of these ideas are in keeping with DOP's mission, which is to expand opportunities for clients to move out of the criminal and juvenile justice systems through meaningful education, employment, health services, family engagement and civic participation. By embedding our most valuable resource—probation officers and their supervisors—in the same communities where large numbers of our clients live, we are better positioned to help our clients get their lives on track, which ultimately leads to greater public safety.

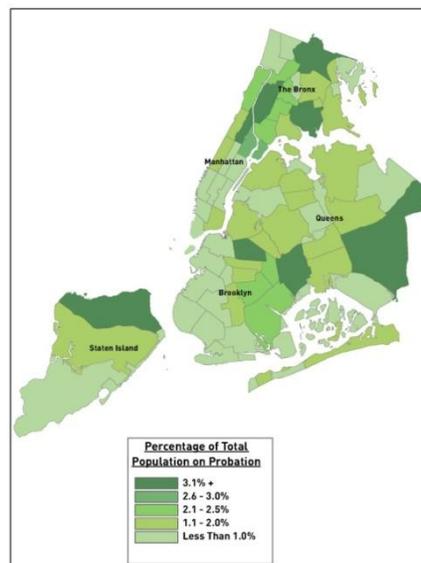
The easiest way to understand the NeON is to examine the three component parts that give the initiative its name: Neighborhood, Opportunity, and Network.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

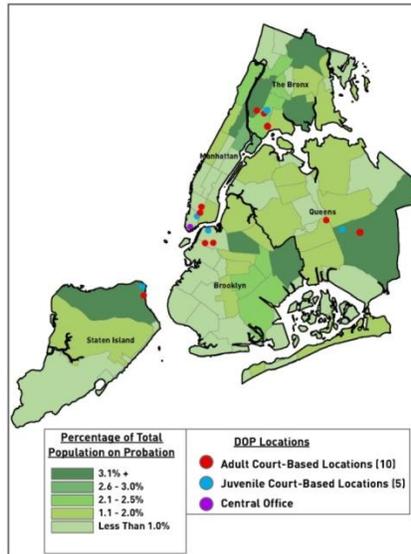
Identifying the NeON Neighborhoods and Justice Reinvestment: In order to understand how we determined where the NeON sites would be located, it's important to know a little bit about the initiative's theoretical underpinnings.

Justice Reinvestment is a theory that was formulated as a vehicle to A) reduce both the number of people in the correctional system and the swollen budgets spent to incarcerate or supervise them, and B) redirect public resources to neighborhoods where criminal justice is often the dominant government presence. Most Justice Reinvestment efforts have been top-down, state-led initiatives, with actual or projected savings from downsizing prison populations and budgets going primarily to community correctional agencies rather than community institutions and infrastructure. At DOP, we implemented Justice Reinvestment from a different, more community-focused approach.

We began by looking at where our clients lived. As you can see from the map on the screen, probation clients are concentrated in a small number of neighborhoods:

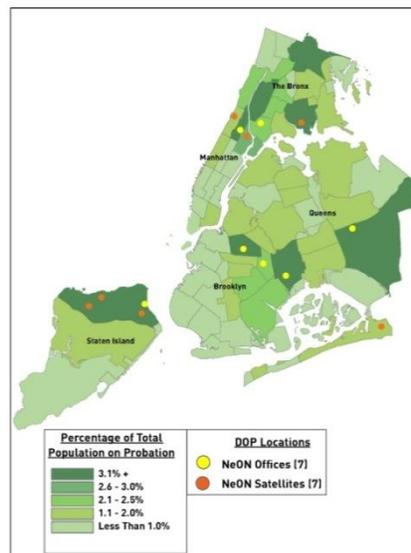


We then compared this map to the locations of our existing Court-based offices:

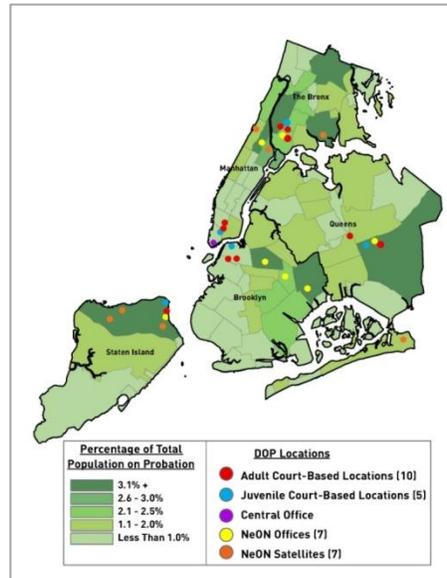


As you can see, the majority of offices were far from where our clients lived. This wasn't just inconvenient for clients; it made it much harder for probation officers to develop relationships with the community-based organizations that were best-equipped to provide our clients with the services they need. It also made it difficult for our staff members to leverage those relationships for the betterment of public safety and client outcomes.

The solution was clear: We needed to move into the communities where our clients live. As you can see from the map of our NeON offices and NeON Satellites, that's exactly what we did:



Finally, here's a map that includes our court-based offices, along with all of the NeONs and Satellites:



I would like to thank Council Member Arroyo, whose district includes the South Bronx NeON, and Council Member Richards, whose district includes our Far Rockaway Satellite, which is co-located with Safe Space. Both of your staffs have been extremely gracious and helpful as we've opened NeONs in your districts.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Probation Officer/Client Interactions: Moving probation officers into the communities where our clients live is just a start. As Jacqueline Simmons, a Supervising Probation Officer at the Brownsville NeON, puts it, “We need to take the time to do something other than cookie-cutter probation.”

DOP has worked with federal and state partners to implement scientifically-validated risk and needs assessments for both juvenile and adult clients. With these assessments, we can respond to each client's demonstrated criminogenic needs and focus our resources on clients who run the greatest risk of reoffending. DOP has adopted an evidence and strengths-based approach to supervision that recognizes and builds on the clients' assets rather than focusing solely on his or her shortcomings and mistakes. We have also undertaken training in motivational interviewing.

These strategies are being implemented agency-wide, but they are especially well-suited to the work being done in the NeONs.

Young Men’s Initiative: The New York City Young Men’s Initiative (YMI) is a prime example of DOP’s success leveraging additional resources for our clients. We administer seven YMI programs, making us one of the lead partner agencies in this important initiative. Our YMI programs provide probation clients with access to education, mentorships, internships, employment, and much more. With each program, DOP contracts with community-based organizations across the city. All told, we invested more than \$30 million in NeON communities through YMI.

Creating Welcoming Spaces: When it comes to our efforts to create welcoming spaces, our clients say it best. Here’s what one of our South Bronx clients said after walking into a probation office that had been transformed into a Resource Hub: “Now you’ve really done it. Now I actually *want* to come here.”

His favorable reaction was the result of lots of hard work by DOP staff, City agency partners, and a gifted team of architects and graphic designers.

When I began my tenure at DOP, one of my first priorities was making our waiting rooms, which tended to be beige and soulless, more welcoming and useful. The first step was establishing the Waiting Room Improvement Team (WRIT), which was comprised of DOP staff members from throughout the chain of command, as well as community partners.

The WRIT’s findings were then handed off to an implementation team led by See ChangeNYC, an initiative of the NYC Department of Design and Construction. See Change enlisted the help of Biber Architects; the painters union; and two acclaimed graphic artists, James Victore and Paul Sahre. Together, they created a series of vibrant and exciting spaces. The offices that didn’t get Biber-designed spaces still received help to improve their waiting rooms. All of the Resource Hubs include computers for client use; video monitors that stream news, local events, and special programming; and books, magazines, and other literature.



Before and After: South Bronx NeON Resource Hub

As Rodney Levy, Branch Chief of the South Jamaica NeON puts it, in the Resource Hub “You don’t feel like you’re sitting in a government office waiting for someone who doesn’t care.” As a result, the clients are more receptive and motivated, which ultimately results in improved public safety.

Bringing Arts to the NeONs: One of the most remarkable parts of the NeON story is our collaboration with some of New York City’s most outstanding arts organizations. At our Brownsville NeON, DOP has partnered with Groundswell on a mural project that is funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The project is connecting young NeON clients with professional artists to research, plan, and paint several large-scale outdoor murals on or near Pitkin Avenue in Brownsville.

Our South Bronx NeON features a poet-in-residence, Dave Johnson, who conducts a workshop several times a week that includes clients and staff. He also organizes weekly poetry slams that are open to the public. Participants’ poems were recently collected in *Free Verse*, a new journal that was published with help from SeeChangeNYC.

Through Carnegie Hall’s Weill Music Institute, clients at the Harlem and South Bronx NeONs are participating in music writing workshops. They have performed their compositions with professional musicians and singers at venues such as the theater at the Dempsey Theater in Harlem, John Jay College, and Gracie Mansion, and there are more concerts to come. I would

like to take this opportunity to thank Council Members Cabrera, King and Palma for providing grants to support Carnegie Hall's work at the South Bronx NeON.

We recently announced *NeON Arts*, a \$1 million public/private initiative that will fund local arts organizations in the seven NeON communities. The two-year initiative, which will be facilitated by Carnegie Hall, is supported by the Open Society Foundations and will connect community-based artists and local arts organizations to probation clients. The artists and clients will collaborate on projects in a variety of disciplines, including dance, music, theater, visual art, poetry, and digital media. In addition to creating meaningful art projects that will benefit their local community, participants will learn important skills and develop positive peer relationships.

Education: DOP has worked with the Department of Education to increase access to educational opportunities by providing GED preparation courses to clients at our NeON locations. As one client said at a graduation event attended by DOE Chancellor Dennis Walcott, "I've shaken all kind of cons' hands, I've shaken all kinds of fools' hands, but I'm very proud to say I'm one of the first people in my family who shook a *commissioner's* hand." And the courses aren't restricted to probation clients—members of the general public can—and do—enroll.

THE NETWORK

Joining Local Networks: At the heart of the NeON is a network of local educators, businesses, healthcare providers, service providers, arts organizations, and tenant associations that leverage public and private resources to increase opportunities for probation clients. NeON leadership and staff are tasked with engaging local stakeholders, which can include everything from attending a local Community Board meeting to hosting a college fair.

Through these connections, DOP staff members become more familiar with community assets, needs and activities, and are better able to link clients to useful opportunities. At the same time, the staff functions as NeON community ambassadors, increasing understanding and support for our work.

This effort is best captured by the NeON Satellites, which are co-located in the offices of local non-profits and host DOP staff members a few days a week. The Satellites allow us to expand the reach of the NeON and more easily connect clients to local resources, sometimes just by

walking them down the hall. This kind of outreach builds community understanding and trust and normalizes both probation operations and clients.

NeON Stakeholder Group: The work of each NeON is guided and informed by robust NeON Stakeholder Groups, which are comprised of traditional leaders, service providers, advocates, grassroots organizers, NeON staff, and probation clients and their family members. The Groups not only ensure that the NeONs reflect the needs and goals of the neighborhood; they also play a key role in developing and implementing community benefit projects and awarding funding for *NeON Arts* programs.

OUTCOMES

Because the NeON initiative is so new, it is too early to calculate NeON-specific outcomes. We are working with researchers from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice on assessing the NeON model. Their findings will go a long way towards quantifying the model's initial impact. In the meantime, I can share some agency-wide outcomes that bode well for the NeON.

We are working with a challenging population—85% of adult probation clients are on probation following a felony arrest. And yet nearly four out of five of them—79% —complete probation, and only 4% of those who do complete get re-arrested for a felony within a year. Put another way, almost everyone comes onto probation following a felony arrest; the vast majority complete probation successfully; and almost nobody who completes gets rearrested for a felony. That's a success rate I'd stack up against any prison or jail.

CONCLUSION

In addition to the great reviews we've received from staff and clients, there is also plenty of evidence that NeON is gaining traction in the wider world. Here are a few of my favorite examples:

- Jeremy Travis, the esteemed President of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, called the NeON a “game-changer” in an interview with *The New York Times*.
- Delegations from as close as Suffolk County and as far away as England, Denmark and the Netherlands have asked us for tours of the NeON, which we were happy to give.

- The cover article of the current edition of *Perspectives*, the official journal of the American Probation and Parole Association, is on the NeON initiative.
- United Neighborhood Houses featured NeON in a recent report entitled “Blueprint for Neighborhoods,” and the Center for an Urban Future named NeON one of the top ten policy innovations the next administration should build on.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about the NeON initiative. I’d like to close by inviting each of you to join me for a tour of a NeON. We are pleased to answer any questions that you have.