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Community justice diversion program competing for grant

Justice program seeks funds through the LA2050 Grants Challenge

By L.J. Williamson

The organizer of a community-centered diversion program in Los Angeles is seeking funding to spread the program to other cities through the LA2050 Grants Challenge competition.

Implemented in Los Angeles in October 2014, the Neighborhood Justice Program is a pre-filing diversion program that sends defendants accused of low-level crimes - such as petty theft, vandalism, underage drinking, or disturbing the peace - before volunteer panels of community members instead of into the court system.

The panel then decides on the consequences for the crime, which may include restitution, community service, letters of apology, or classes. If the defendant completes the panels' sentence, no criminal charges are filed.

The Los Angeles program diverted approximately 800 defendants from charges in its first year, according to attorney and designer of the program, Peter Borenstein.

Borenstein is hoping to win enough online votes between now and Nov. 3 for his organization, ReConnect.LA, to win the \$100,000 grant and expand the pre-filing diversion model beyond Los Angeles and into cities that prosecute their own misdemeanors, such as Compton, Long Beach, Santa Monica, and Pasadena.

The advantage of the Neighborhood Justice Panel approach is that defendants feel more of a connection to proceedings that are conducted by local community members, Borenstein explained. It's an opportunity to see the impact of their crimes on the communities they live in, and defendants also have more time to be heard - which he said is crucial to their success.

"People don't get a chance to tell their story in an arraignment court - it's assembly line justice," Borenstein said. "There's not time to really work with the person who committed a crime, it's just about clearing the docket."

The program also helps reduce costs, recidivism and caseloads, Borenstein said.

The community justice concept has a number of distinct advantages and has largely been underutilized, said Alex Simpson, professor at California Western School of Law. "It is a very interesting approach to resolving relatively minor disputes, and there are some studies that show it can be a much more helpful process for the victims than the traditional method because it's more focused on the harms they individually felt."

City Attorney Mike Feuer could not be reached for comment.

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