



Ralph Greenslade

Cook County Circuit Court Judge Colleen F. Sheehan in her chambers and courtroom at the Cook County Juvenile Court, 1100 S. Hamilton Ave., on May 5. Sheehan will preside over the Restorative Justice Community Court, a new Cook County Circuit Court initiative announced last month and funded by a Justice Department grant to restore relationships between nonviolent offenders and their victims.

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Community court offers hope for healing

By [LAURAANN WOOD](#)
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Decisions on how nonviolent defendants in North Lawndale pay for the crimes they have committed are usually left to judges and juries. But by next year, the members of the community will have a say.

It's the central idea behind the Restorative Justice Community Court, a new Cook County Circuit Court initiative announced last month and funded by a two-year, \$200,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance.

The money will fund a \$60,000 annual community court coordinator's salary, training for court personnel and other operational costs, according to a release from the office of Chief Cook County Circuit Judge Timothy C. Evans. The court has applied for, received and will apply for other grants to further help with costs, Evans said.

With the court's anticipated debut set for early 2017, some details are still in the works, such as a building location, or what procedures will look like.

But no matter what shape the community court takes before opening



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Most people are getting out of prison, and when they're getting out, where are they going? They're going back to these neighborhoods," said Circuit Judge Colleen F. Sheehan, who will preside over the court. "So it would behoove the neighborhood to be a part of this person's life as they come back into the neighborhood." [Home](#) [Courts](#) ▼ [Calendar](#)

It is a unique initiative, founders say, because its success depends on the community's genuine support of the program; members will work with the court to help restore defendants' relationships with the people their crimes affected most.

"A restorative justice community court cannot operate without robust community engagement. If the community's not buying it and they're not going for it, then it's not going anywhere," said Clifford Nellis, who heads the Lawndale Christian Legal Center.

The center forms part of the North Lawndale Community Restorative Justice Hub — a group of community leaders and service providers that partnered with the circuit court to help implement the Restorative Justice Community Court.

Eligible defendants must have a pending nonviolent charge and no more than one prior felony conviction on their record to participate in the court program. Successful completion brings the possibility of having their charges dropped and arrest expunged.

And that alone could greatly benefit a community where many male residents have at least one felony conviction against them and many have been arrested or served jail time, Nellis said.

He said the program will also benefit the community by providing the appropriate services to explore the possible underlying issues spurring offenders to commit crimes and give said offenders the necessary help — be it in the form of education, job training or mental health services — to prevent them from re-offending.

"It's easy to go through a pinch of time in jail, in the sense that you don't have to sit down with the person you harmed, talk about why you did it, express remorse and figure out what it will take to restore the harm," Nellis said. "Wouldn't the most just outcome be that people experience some sort of healing and restoration of the situation? I don't think we talk that way. I don't think we think that way."

The court also looks to employ restorative justice initiatives, like letters of apology; meaningful community service; and peace circles in which criminal offenders sit down with their victims, discuss what caused the crime to happen and explore tactics for preventing future crimes.

"I think it would work because you're getting the buy-in of the community," Sheehan said. "Not every case is a triple homicide or a horrible violent case — most of the cases aren't — so I think it would be beneficial if we began to take a look at alternative ways of maybe approaching those types of cases."

The approach is also one that gives offenders a chance to be reintegrated back into their community rather than being shunned from it, Evans said.

"It keeps the person who is the accused connected to the community instead of being pushed out of the community to the gangs and others who take advantage of these young people," he said.

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you hear it every day: 'You won't believe me. You'll believe the police,'" Sheehan said.

But community court could be a beneficial avenue through which people truly feel as though they have been heard and justice was served, Sheehan said.

And the circuit court could "take a quantum jump forward" with improved community relations as it continues to press for justice and fairness in the system, Evans said.

"For a court system to be effective, people have to believe in it," he said. "If nonviolent offenders can come back to the community as informed citizens, then they can start to believe in a court system that has that kind of positive effect."



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