

MEMORANDUM

VIA FACSIMILE and ELECTRONIC MAIL

TO: Public Defenders*

FROM: Kirsten D. Levingston

RE: Ideas for Community Outreach

DATE: April 24, 2003

This paper lays out ideas about how to improve “community outreach” in your office and build closer ties to your community. I strongly encourage you to identify one or two people in your office who can begin thinking about these community outreach ideas, and ultimately supervise their implementation. We would be happy to be in contact with whomever is working on these issues on a regular, even weekly, basis if you think that would be helpful. The Brennan Center is here, and eager, to assist you in any way we can.

Below is advice on how to translate “community outreach” ideas into action:

(i). *Build a Citizens Advisory Board:* The Charlottesville-Albemarle Public Defender Office in Virginia, which is part of the COD Network, has had a Citizens Advisory Committee since 1998. Its CAC has really benefited the office. Among other things, the CAC reviews the office budget and lobbies funders for additional dollars,

* This memorandum was originally prepared and tailored for a specific defender jurisdiction, and discusses recommendations suggested by the National Legal Aid and Defender Association. Because of its broad applicability, we have edited the original memo into a set of general recommendations all defenders should consider.

recruits lawyers for the office, and hosts public forums on topics the community cares about (like racial bias in the system). CAC members, all of whom have their own organizational affiliations, are like good will ambassadors for the public defender office.

Immediate Steps:

- The Charlottesville-Albemarle office is in the Brennan Center COD network
- Jim Hingeley – (434) 951-6300 – is the chief public defender there, and very happy to talk to colleagues about this

(ii). *Develop and implement consistent policies and practices for dealing with client and community complaints:* You can immediately communicate to clients and their families that their views and opinions about your office and services matter.

Immediate Steps:

- Draft a form to unearth complaints – the very existence of such a form tells clients that their views matter. Use that form to monitor complaints and identify the root of problems (e.g. if clients and their families feel they do not have enough contact with lawyers, you might set standards for the amount of contact that is expected in every case)
- Develop a “clients bill of rights” that tells clients and their families what to expect from your representation
 - We have a sample client satisfaction survey as well as a sample “bill of rights” that can serve as models

(iii). *Follow the lead of other public defender offices nationwide and create a professional law office reception area that connotes courtesy, “customer service,” and professionalism:* There are two pieces to this – the physical space and staff training.

Immediate physical space steps:

- Ask staff how they’d like to improve the reception area, and whether they know folks with skills who can help (e.g. demolition/construction skills, painting skills, artists, supply store owners)

- Invite a community group – maybe a Habitat for Humanity branch – to partner with you to apply a fresh coat of paint
- Place interesting materials in the reception area for clients – info about the office, local social services agencies, parenting magazines, children’s magazines
- Hang a bulletin board with useful information (e.g. office hours, office mission, staff roster)

Immediate staff training steps:

- Inform/remind reception staff of the importance of their role: For many clients and family members they are the face of the public defender’s office
- Inform/remind reception staff that they are dealing with people in crises, and that the agency’s mission is to help make these difficult times easier
- Give reception staff specific, basic instructions on how office visitors are to be received and treated (e.g. greet all visitors with “good morning, welcome to the public defender office, how may I help you”)
- Inform/remind lawyers that when they come into contact with office visitors, even people who are not their clients, they should courteously greet them

(iv). Inventory staff skills and resources through surveys and/or staff meeting discussions to determine the community work that staff is already engaged in. We have developed a survey instrument defenders may use to inventory staff involvement in the community.

Immediate steps:

- Circulate the staff community work survey
- Analyze the results
- Share the results internally so staff see they are already involved in the community

- Share the results with the community – perhaps develop a poster or bulletin board with a caption like “Other places where you can find defender . . . [volunteering here, tutoring there, etc.]”

(v). *Seek staff input on other initiatives the organization can feasibly undertake to improve community relations:* Announce to staff interest in their input in identifying ways the office can build relationships with community groups. You can use a staff meeting to have a discussion on this point.

Immediate Steps:

- Identify 3 – 5 people in your organization – not just attorneys – who are important leaders; meet with them, explain what you want to do, ask for their support and ideas about community initiatives
- Plan a staff meeting or brown bag lunch on the topic of “Building Bridges between our office and the community”
- The Brennan Center will help you plan the agenda for this

(vi). *Create a forum in which community members feel free to both air complaints and offer suggestions for how the office can be more attuned to community needs:* Opening up lines of communication with the community is a long term and, admittedly, daunting process. Productive relationships take time and persistence to build. But there are things you can do to get the ball rolling.

Immediate (and longer) Steps:

- Talk to your colleagues in the community – other leaders, friends, family. Seek their advice on how to rehabilitate the agency, assuming that’s necessary, in their eyes
- Make yourself/your office available to community groups to talk about who you are, your mission, rights and the criminal justice process; invite their ideas on how to meet community needs better. Schools, teacher’s groups, church leaders, groups that former clients belong to, may be interested in hearing what you have to say

- In giving talks you must be prepared to hear criticism of the office without defensively responding to it
- Reach out to groups like these: National groups that may have local chapters in Las Vegas (Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM); ACLU; Catholic Charities; NAACP and other organizations that focus on ethnic groups and communities of color); Also, county employee associations; local unions; local churches, temples, mosques