

A JUDGE'S PERSPECTIVE ON *BRIDGES OUT OF POVERTY*

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This is one in a series of articles related to courts participating in the Supreme Court of Ohio's Bridges Out of Poverty Project. Working to integrate the concepts delineated in Bridges Out of Poverty into various court programs, the overall goal of this project is to develop model court programs within a continuum to serve as learning sites for Ohio communities. More information on Bridges Out of Poverty and the project will be forthcoming in future editions of For the Record.

When I took the bench in January of 2005, I anticipated the hardest part of my job to be putting people in jail and evicting them from their homes. Come to find out, the hardest part is dealing with individuals who do not have the resources or the knowledge needed to lead a life without criminal activity. I had come to find myself wrestling with hard to answer questions: Why don't they pay their rent? Why don't they show up for court on time? Why don't they get a valid driver's license and go find a job. At first, I just put them in jail for not showing up or evicted them for not paying their rent. Then I began to listen more carefully and started to realize what made them tick. It appeared that equal access to the courts was not available to the low-income individual because the system is based on middle class rules and middle class resources. They were struggling with survival at that moment, rather than what was waiting for them days or weeks down the road.

In the summer of 2009, my staff and I enrolled in a presentation of *Bridges Out of Poverty*. We immediately came to understand how we could make our courtroom more user-friendly and still keep the integrity of the court intact. We made changes that met the needs of the court, the clerk and the probation department, while at the same time addressed the hurdles people from generational poverty often encounter that impede their successful exit from the court system.

Initially, we focused on the driver's license offenders. We discovered that a large part of our traffic offenses were made up of people struggling financially who had no idea how to get a valid driver's license. Reinstating one's driver's license

can be challenging for any individual, no matter the financial status. Therefore, the court created a checklist that breaks the tasks of getting a valid license down into simple step-by-step procedures. After the defendants enter a plea of no contest or guilty at the arraignment, the court enrolls them in a dispositional program, supplies them with a checklist and meets with them monthly as they maneuver through the Bureau of Motor Vehicles' (BMV) procedures.

Considering that the BMV's closest regional office is one hour from Marion and that people in generational poverty seldom have adequate transportation, the clerk's office installed a public-access computer with links to the BMV so that defendants can review their driver's license status and pay reinstatement fees online.

Knowing the importance of relationships to individuals living in poverty, the court established specialized dockets: the WIN Mental Health Docket and the Treatment Docket. During the weekly sessions, the judge, probation officer, counselor, and case manager review each defendant's treatment plan. The defendant also comments on his or her progress with the plan and offers feedback. Meeting with defendants as a group in these weekly special court sessions enables the judge, officers of the court and defendants to build and maintain relationships with one another which lead to effective treatment outcomes, less recidivism and better understanding through a relationship of mutual respect.

Many times defendants stand before the bench with no home, no job and no skill to get a job. The Ohio Benefit Bank is an internet-based, counselor assisted service that connects those with low and moderate incomes to a variety of government

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resources, benefits and programs. The municipal probation department has a terminal and counselor available all day, every day, to investigate services and benefits available. Rather than the defendant spending endless days scurrying around the county making application to every social service agency, he or she can apply in one spot for several services.

We also realized our community service program needed some improvement. The municipal court is working to implement community service at more sites and for more community events like the annual Marion Popcorn Festival. The offenders can work off their fines and costs at an hourly rate of \$10.00, provided the fines and costs are worked off in their entirety. Offering this incentive for a \$4.00 increase over the \$6.00 hourly rate paid if less than the total amount due is satisfied motivates the individual to complete the community service. This in turn strengthens the integrity of the program and improves the likelihood that these financial obligations will be honored.

Our county jail is a multi-county facility which houses misdemeanor and felony offenders for both Marion and Hardin counties. Because space is limited, misdemeanants are the first to be turned away if the jail is full. Although most misdemeanor offenders would welcome the opportunity to delay serving their jail sentence, those who are employed and must make special arrangements to do their time and often suffer severe consequences, such as loss of their job, when they are turned away and must reschedule their jail time. Rather than delay their incarceration, the court will allow some non-violent offenders to serve time on electronic home monitoring rather than in jail. The court has acquired a grant that provides \$20,000 to subsidize indigent offenders who cannot afford to pay for electronic home monitoring devices. Keeping these offenders at home is a much more cost effective option than jail and allows offenders to maintain responsibilities to their families.

In December of 2009, a portion of the municipal court staff was trained as trainers for *Bridges Out of Poverty*. It was in this training that I came to realize the importance of community involvement in addressing poverty. In February of

2010, the Marion Municipal Court, the Marion Area Chamber of Commerce and the Tri-Rivers Educational Computer Association – an information technology center for a consortium of over 40 Ohio School Districts located primarily in Delaware, Knox, Marion, Morrow, Muskingum, and Wyandot counties – teamed up to sponsor a community kick-off event. Over 150 individuals were immersed in a poverty simulation in the morning session and participated in *Bridges Out of Poverty* training during the afternoon. In June of 2010, the United Way, the Marion Area Counseling Center, the Marion County Job and Family Services and the Marion General Hospital sponsored four more days of *Bridges* training. In August of 2010, the Marion City Schools provided *Bridges* training for their entire staff, and Marion General Hospital trained their department heads. To date, approximately five hundred community members have received *Bridges* training. These trainees are forming a strong volunteer base that will work together to accomplish our community goals.

In April of 2010, the Marion General Hospital and the municipal court sponsored our first *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World* class. The ten “investigators” developed mental models of poverty, middle class and wealth; learned about the “hidden” rules in each of these classes; and explored how they fit in. The investigators evaluated their resources, as well as those of our community, and learned how to leverage stronger areas to build resources where they are lacking. At the end of the eight week course, seven of the ten *Getting Ahead* investigators graduated. Presently, all are employed and/or pursuing higher education. As of September of 2010, two additional businesses and a social services organization have committed to sponsor three more *Getting Ahead* classes, and a new *Getting Ahead* class just started September 14th.

All of these efforts require a great deal of community collaboration. In May of 2010, the court formed a community-wide Steering Committee. This committee is working diligently to develop a vision, mission and strategies to address and eliminate poverty. Action groups were formed to support each of the six major strategies. One particular focus is to train allies who will circle around and support *Getting Ahead* graduates as they move forward to build their resources and to make the transition to

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stability. Along the way, close relationships formed with individuals in both the middle and wealth classes are invaluable.

These changes and developments are breaking down the barriers encountered by defendants. We are serving individuals better and still maintaining the integrity of the court. As I look back on our efforts over the last several months, I am surprised by the amount of influence the court can have in the community when it steps outside its four walls. Not only are we working to eliminate barriers to a more accessible municipal court for all, but our community is making strides to better understand and, someday, eliminate poverty.
