



To the Mayor and Members of the City Council

May 7, 2024

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SUBJECT: MUNICIPAL COURT-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UPDATE

The purpose of this Informal Report is to provide information related to the Municipal Court's community engagement through Court in the Community/ Warrant Forgiveness, Community Court (Homeless Docket), and Summer Earn and Learn program. All efforts to ensure the Municipal Court is demystified and building trust with the community.

MUNICIPAL COURT GOALS

1. **Enhance Public Trust** with community engagement and external partnerships to encourage early compliance.
2. **Improve Accessibility and Experience** to the court through resource and service alignment.
3. **Promote Public Safety** of the constituency through enforcement and security.
4. **Fiscal Accountability & Stewardship** in the use of public funds and collection of fines and fees owed to the city.
5. **Incorporate** practices and policies that support the department's **commitment to community access and opportunity**.

COURT IN THE COMMUNITY/WARRANT FORGIVENESS

The Court in the Community-Warrant Forgiveness program started in 2018 and was an intentional move away from a fear-based approach to executing municipal warrants. Like the Courthouse itself, it is a "Safe Harbor," meaning patrons will not be arrested on outstanding municipal warrants. Taking Municipal Court "into the community" not only provides greater access to government services, but also provides an opportunity to demystify the legal system and educate the community about other quality of life enhancing programs, thereby increasing equal opportunity and access to services.

The program began with multiple events in every city council district during the "Warrant Forgiveness Month" in February. Due to the success, positive feedback from testimonials, and customer satisfaction surveys, the events are now held one Saturday a month, excluding July and December. Working in – partnership with City Council members, the Court selects locations that can provide indoor space and parking for up to 120 attendees, three (3) judges, and 25 support staff members. Locations include libraries, community centers, churches, business parking lots, and even mobile units.

Every part of the Court — including clerical staff, judges, and city marshals —work together to provide an exceptional customer experience, one of the City's core values. That experience begins with staff reaching out to people with warrants by phone to inform them of and help them register for the events. The Court also works with the City's Communication & Community Engagement Department to reach its culturally and socio-economically diverse audiences. Marketing collateral includes both high tech and low-tech tools such as flyers that can be printed or shared electronically and short format videos that are broadcast on the city's cable channel and social media platforms. The Court also leverages the resources of the Court's third-party collections vendor to advertise the program and resolve their outstanding cases.

At the Court in the Community-Warrant Forgiveness events, a judge reviews participant's outstanding cases, discusses options to resolve them, and determines eligibility for the removal of warrants, fees, costs, and fines. Outcomes can include authorization of a time payment plan, community service, credit time

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served, determination of indigency, and setting for a court hearing. Many times, the warrant and collection fees can be removed by the Judge. For some, resolving their outstanding cases also removes barriers to employment, housing opportunities and even the ability to obtain a driver's license.

Access to justice in a non-threatening environment is at the core of these events, which are not only attended by those seeking warrant resolution, but also their children and other family members. For this reason, the Court collaborates with other local governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations such as the EnVision Center, North Central Texas Goodwill and Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas to provide COVID19 vaccinations, utility assistance, school supply giveaways, food and clothes distribution, employment resources, legal guidance, and services for the homeless. The Court also partners with the neighboring City of Arlington and Tarrant County.

Shortly after the program's inception in 2018, a letter recognizing the program's innovation was sent to the city's Chief Judge and Mayor from Texas State Representative James White, District 19, who co-sponsored a bill revising state code provisions governing court procedures for assessing fines and costs for criminal defendants who are indigent or unable to pay. In 2024 the program received national recognition placing second in the National League of Cities City Cultural Diversity Awards for cities population over 500,000. Since its inception the program has served approximately 16,000 patrons, resulting in the processing of 82,000 cases, removal of 40,000 warrants, waiver of \$9.8 million in warrant and collection fees, and closure of 36,749 cases.

Upcoming Court in the Community Events

- May 18-Wedgewood Baptist Church
- May 22- Continue the Climb Job Fair-Resource Connection Gym
- June 29-Vivian J. Lincoln Library

COMMUNITY COURT (HOMELESS COURT)

The Community Court began as part of the City of Fort Worth's ten-year plan to end chronic homelessness called Directions Home. The Community Court is composed of two dockets: Community Court Docket and a Compliance Docket. Participation in the Community Court is voluntary.

The purpose of the Community Court is to remove barriers that result from Class C misdemeanor citations in the City of Fort Worth by providing alternative sentencing to homeless defendants. The court aids defendants by disposing of cases that prevent them from obtaining employment and housing. Defendants who are housed in a domestic violence shelter or participating in a residential treatment program may also be eligible. By participating, a defendant will not pay a fine or serve time in jail. An alternative sentencing structure is offered including counseling, life-skill courses, chemical dependency programs, community service, continuing education, employment assistance, etc. Successful participation in the court may result in the dismissal of fines, court cost, and fees.

Beginning in May 2022 the Court started holding all dockets on site at the True Worth Place. Defendants are referred by social service agencies such as the Presbyterian Night Shelter, Day Resource Center, and

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Catholic Charities. Agency case managers are asked to indicate their client's supportive needs and current involvement in restorative programs. An agreed order of deferral is created based on the client's restorative needs and violations committed. Defendants are expected to meet the intent of the order and provide proof of their progress. Upon successful completion of his/her deferral, the defendant graduates from the program and is presented with a certificate of completion.

Five Year Summary 2019 – 2023

- 3,280 Total Cases Set
- 2,162 Cases Closed

SUMMER EARN AND LEARN (SEAL)

The City of Fort Worth is proud to announce once again collaborating with Goodwill North Central Texas to participate in the SEAL Program through departments across the City.

Through a partnership, the SEAL program started in 2017 with:

- Texas Workforce Commission(TWC) – Vocational Rehabilitation,
- Goodwill North Central Texas

The program is about creating pathways to employment with public and private employers for students with disabilities; ages 15-22. Workforce Solutions covers all wages and Workers Compensation insurance. Vocational Rehabilitation will provide any accommodations required.

The Summer Earn & Learn Program aims to:

- Inspire students through the power of work.
- Introduce them to a world of possibilities in a variety of careers.
- Prepare students for the future through developing and enhancing their work skills.
- Help students gain familiarity with the workplace environment and develop transferable job skills.

Interns perform a range of tasks to include general office work, event planning, assist with program delivery, customer service tasks, setup and take down, data evaluation and gathering bench-marking information . This year's program has two cohort groups:

- Cohort 1: June 3rd-July 11th Cohort 2: July 12th-Aug 11th

Highlights

- 6th year for the City to participate with 100 participants hosted through 2023
- As a part of this program Disability Awareness Training is offered citywide to staff by Texas Workforce Solutions
- Texas Workforce Commission pays the salary for the intern and their coach

If you have any questions, please contact William F. Rumuly, Municipal Court Director at 817-392-6736.

**David Cooke
City Manager**