

# The Community Docket

## A Judge's Perspective on PROBLEM SOLVING JUSTICE

November 2007 Issue 2.



The Honorable William Light

Sitting in his black robe in his chair overlooking the courtroom, the Lynchburg Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court is Judge William Light's domain, five days a week. On the fourth Tuesday of the month, Judge Light presides over a different court: Juvenile Community Court - the first of its kind in Virginia. The Community Court has been open for eight months and according to Judge Light, has been going very well. "I am very pleased with the progress I am seeing," said Light. "I am particularly impressed with the kids who are doing more community service hours than we have asked them to do. They are making a very good impression on the members of the community they are assisting." Judge Light agreed to become the

judge for the Juvenile Community Court pilot program after speaking to Mike Doucette and Shannon Hadeed about the program. "This was a Commonwealth's Attorney's Office initiative. When they came to talk to me about it, it seemed interesting and something I wanted to do," said Judge Light.

In Community Court, Judge Light approves or disapproves the sentence recommended by a disposition team. The disposition team consists of community members, non-profit representatives, city agency representatives, mental health experts, and Commonwealth's Attorney staff. The team meets to discuss each individual case after the offender has been interviewed by one of the members. When asked his opinion of the recommendations presented to the court Judge Light replied, "From my perspective everything is worked out. All I have to do is approve or disapprove. In traditional court it's different. I think there is more accountability in Community court. You are forced to show responsibility for your actions and give back to the community. It's a much more intense thing to go through. For the people who participate, it means more to them being made to give back and pay for what they have done makes a big difference. I think it's easier in traditional court to take your licks and go."

Judge Light stated that the Community

Court was initially met with some resistance from the court system. "You always encounter that with something new, different procedures. Now that everything has fallen in place I am not seeing that," said Light. Judge Light thinks his interaction with defendants in community court has changed. He attributes that change to a number of factors

including the willingness of offenders to do the work and the pride he sees them express after they have completed their hours. "There are no good feelings involved between the court and the defendant in traditional court," said Light. "In Community Court there is a sense of working together towards a goal instead of an adversarial situation. I praise them when they have finished and they almost always do." Judge Light was also pleased to see the offender and the community working together for a common good. "It's a better solution from the perspective of the community and the defendant's point of view," he said.

The most important outcome to Judge Light is the realization on the part of the defendant that there are consequences to the victim. He used the example of one graffiti case where the defendant was required to clean the graffiti up and apologize in person to the business owner. "While doing the graffiti for example, they are just having fun and don't realize what the owner has to do," said Light. "They realize the crimes they commit are not harmless: either the community or the victim are directly impacted by their actions. Making the defendant see the victim's perspective creates empathy in the defendant and helps them understand what the victim went through as a result of the defendant's actions," he said. Overall, Judge Light continues to be pleased by the success of the program and plans to continue it in some form even after the pilot period expires.

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**SUCCESS**  
*Community Court Results*



## VIRGINIA COMMUNITY CORPS AND COMMUNITY PROSECUTION ... A Perfect Fit!

In 2006, as the Community Prosecution initiative expanded to include a community problem-solving court, the need to hire additional staff was apparent. With budget constraints and limited funding resources, a logical solution was to collaborate with the Lynchburg Department of Social Services and submit a Virginia Community Corps Site application to the Virginia Department of Social Services. The overall goal was to obtain an AmeriCorps member to assist in the coordination of activities and services related to community prosecution. The Virginia Community Corps (VCC) is an AmeriCorps program managed by staff at the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS). AmeriCorps members serve in multiple sites across the Commonwealth. Members are placed in local departments of social services and community action agencies. The Lynchburg Department of Social Services in alliance with the Lynchburg Commonwealth's Attorney's Office was awarded an opportunity to serve as a host site and to hire a full-time AmeriCorps member. Host sites provide a cash match and are responsible for the overall supervision, evaluation, and development of each hired member. Mr. Mark Johnson, Director of Social Services and Ms. Cynthia Kirkland, Assistant Director of Human Resources, with Lynchburg's Department of Social Services, were instrumental in navigating the application and hiring processes. Their knowledge and guidance was invaluable to Commonwealth's Attorneys Office.

In compliance with AmeriCorps policies and procedures, an application and interview process was conducted in October of 2006 and

an AmeriCorps member was hired in December. Ms. Ronnetta Younger was selected out of a pool of highly qualified applicants. Her knowledge of the populations to be served, experience with White Rock Hill Education Center, and her strong desire to make a difference in the lives of others, gave her the competitive edge. Ronnetta's role within the community prosecution unit is to provide case management services to adult community court participants and to serve as a liaison between community service providers and the community prosecution team. When asked what she likes most about her job Ronnetta replied, "I love talking to people in the community and letting them know about Community Court."

As part of her new employee orientation and AmeriCorps training requirements, Ronnetta attended a series of classes and panel discussions related to volunteer recruitment, community partnering, and disaster relief. She also attends quarterly VCC member meetings in Richmond. Her upbeat personality and vibrant



Ronnetta Younger sits among members of the Community Court Disposition Team!

energy earned her a spot on the speakers podium at the annual AmeriCorps Convention, where she addressed the new members and talked about her experiences as a Corps member. Ronnetta also attended a program entitled WORKNET. WORKNET is a workshop offered by the Lynchburg Department of Social



Members of the Disposition Team at work!

Services that teaches all aspects of gaining, keeping, and advancing a career. Her participation in the WORKNET workshop series was to gain insight to develop and teach a fast track curriculum for community court participants to attend. "We are another resource for Ronnetta and folks going through the Community Court process" said Cynthia Kirkland, "We try to find out what's keeping them off track and reaching career goals; we have the opportunity to educate folks and teach self-sufficiency." Lynchburg DSS is also presenting the WORKNET series to inmates at the Blue Ridge Regional Jail. According to Ms. Kirkland, "There's always more work to be done, but I feel very good about what we are doing."

## WHAT'S COOKIN' ... In Community Court!



Chef Darren Lee reviews guidelines for kitchen safety

According to Chef Darren Lee, the menu for today is Chicken Alfredo and French Bread. Chef Lee and his students gather in the kitchen at the Jubilee Occupational Development Center to

learn how to prepare a delicious meal and to develop kitchen safety and awareness skills. One might ask what do Community Court and cooking class have in common? Both projects have a similar goal of encouraging participants to develop skills for sustaining independence and obtaining employment. Thank you Chef Darren

Lee, Duane Thomas, and the Jubilee Family and Occupational Outreach Center for your outstanding efforts to assist Community Court staff and at-risk youth!

Chef Lee covers the following topics during the 3 hour course:

**Guidelines for Kitchen Safety** - Includes a general set of guidelines for kitchen safety both at home and in a commercial food service environment.

**Preventing Falls, Cuts, Burns, and Scalds** - Includes instruction on how to handle and prevent falls, cuts, burns, fires, poisonings and how to administer first aid.

**Personal Hygiene** - Emphasizes the importance of maintaining personal hygiene in preparing

food in the home and in a commercial food setting.

**Kitchen and Food Sanitation** - Explains how kitchen sanitation directly impacts food sanitation.

**Cross-Contamination** - Discusses ways to prevent food contamination during the preparing, storing, and serving of food items.

**Keeping Germs in Check** - Explains and identifies food-borne illnesses.

**Our Mission:** Lynchburg Community Court works to provide the youth and young adults of our community with a second chance to make better choices in their lives. Community justice will be accomplished through an individual plan centered on personal responsibility and accountability, determined by a team of citizen volunteers and our local legal system.

# SUCCESS ... in Lives AND Numbers!

## 2007 Community Court Results

### Success in Lives!

Spending eighteen months in a jail cell isn't what most young adults envision for themselves after graduating from high school. However, that is exactly what happened to John (not his real name) when he was arrested and convicted for distribution of a controlled substance. "This is a place I never want to go back to," said John. Unfortunately, he was arrested several months later and charged with possession of marijuana. With this added charge he was facing court fines and quite possibly another stay in jail. However, someone gave him a second chance. "I went to my advisement and was told I was not eligible to participate in community court because of my previous conviction, but Ms. Hadeed, talked with me after court and asked me why I should be given a second chance. I don't know what I said that convinced her to allow me to participate," explained John. When asked what prompted her to invite John to participate, Ms. Hadeed, Community Prosecutor, commented, "He qualified for Community Court, but because of his drug convictions, I felt he would not benefit from it. I asked John to explain why he should be given the opportunity to participate in Community Court and he replied that he just needed a second chance. He told me he was willing to work hard and that he wanted to make some positive changes in life. I felt he was sincere."

Ms. Hadeed did not inform John that he was going to be allowed to participate in Community Court until a few days before his scheduled court date. "She kind of left me hanging right up to the last day before I was going to face the judge," said John. When John came to court he was

informed of his options and rights. He was told that he would have to plead guilty or "no contest" to the charges against him and that the court would take the matter under advisement until he completed the recommendations made by the disposition team. If he completed the recommendations, the charges against him would be dismissed. John completed all of the courts requirements which consisted of 78 community and social service hours and meeting with an advisor from a local college and applying to enroll. His community service work was completed at Jubilee Family and Occupational Development Center, a local non-profit organization. "The time I spent at the center was very rewarding and educational," said John. Community Court lets you know what's going on in your community." John also met with an advisor at the National Business College and immediately enrolled in several business classes. When asked what he said to the evaluator during the court intake that may have caused the recommendation (community court sentence) that he enroll in college classes, he replied, "I told the intake person that I wanted to go to college to earn a degree." When asked how he is doing in his classes, John replied, "So far, I have not received a grade below a B." He attributes his success with school and the Community Court program to people holding him accountable and giving him a chance to prove himself. John's current goals are to obtain a business degree and to one day start his own business. When asked his overall opinion of Community Court, John replied "Community Court gives people a chance. The Traditional court doesn't push you towards bettering yourself, Community Court does."

### A New Perspective

Excerpts from an essay composed by a 13 year old Community Court Participant: who was required to write a three page essay on what she had learned from her experience of being arrested for Possession of Marijuana. She was sentenced to 30 community service hours at Lynchburg Grows and continues to volunteer today!

*I believe the consequences are always the hardest. After being caught I realized that I had some tough consequences to face. And sure enough I did. I think the biggest one was not being able to do marching band this year. That right there just blew my mind. Marching band was actually all I wanted to do. I was stunned when I found out but then I realized that I would be there next year.*

*Another thing was that I could not go to regular school for at least a semester. I could never picture myself going to an alternative school. There are little advantages and very many disadvantages! But the greatest disadvantage was not being able to go to football games. I believe the community services was the easiest thing to do. I had a lot of work to do. It wasn't just work it was also a learning experience too. I learned about different types of vegetables and fruit. I think since I already had an interest in food and things of that nature it was easy for me to adapt to the situation and environment. The biggest factor that I have learned from this incident is how to choose my friends. Being around the right friend with good influences can never get you in trouble. I can promise that this will never happen again.*

### Success in Numbers!

Eight months into the Community Court Program the verdict is in... January — September 2007

Defendants	Number and (%) of Defendants Who Agreed to Participate in Community Court	Number and (%) of Defendants Who Declined to Participate in Community Court	Number and (%) of Defendants Who Successfully Completed Community Court Sentence	Number and (%) of Defendants Who Failed to Complete Sentence & Expelled from Community Court	Number and (%) of Defendants Who Received Additional Charges & Expelled from Community Court	Number and (%) of Defendants In the Process of Completing Community Court Sentence
Adults (18-25)	45 (55%)	36 (45%)	22 (49%)	14 (31%)	2 (4.5%)	7 (15.5%)
Juveniles (12-17)	40 (71.5%)	16 (28.5%)	30 (75%)	2 (5%)	2 (5%)	6 (15%)
Totals	85 (62%)	52 (38%)	52 (62%)	16 (18%)	4 (4.75%)	13 (15.25%)

- Number of Social Service Hours Assigned = 926
  - Number of Social Service Hours Completed = 457
  - Number of Community Service Hours Assigned = 1,840
  - Number of Community Service Hours Completed = 1,305
- Total Social and Community Service Hours Assigned = 2,766 Hours**      **Total Social and Community Hours Completed = 1,762 Hours**

### Our Community Service Partners

Salvation Army  
Tweedy Mentoring Services  
White Rock Hill Education Center

- ★ Alliance for Families and Children
- ★ Beyond the Veil Ministries
- ★ Boys and Girls Club of Greater Lynchburg
- ★ Central Virginia Child Development Clinic
- ★ Central Virginia Community Services
- ★ Citizens for a Clean Lynchburg
- ★ Chopper's Salon
- ★ City of Lynchburg
- ★ Court Services Unit
- ★ Couples and Kids
- ★ Fairview United Methodist Church
- ★ Johnson's Health Center
- ★ Jubilee Family and Occupational Outreach Center
- ★ Kid's Haven
- ★ Liberty University (School of Law & Undergraduate)
- ★ Lynchburg College
- ★ Lynchburg City Schools (Adult Education/Amelia Pride Center)
- ★ Lynchburg Community Corrections Program & Pretrial Services
- ★ Lynchburg Department of Social Services
- ★ Lynchburg Fire Marshall's Office
- ★ Lynchburg Grows
- ★ Lynchburg Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court and Clerks
- ★ Lynchburg General District Court and Clerks
- ★ Lynchburg Parks and Recreation
- ★ Lynchburg Police Department
- ★ Lynchburg Public Defender's Office
- ★ Lynchburg Sheriff's Office
- ★ Marriage Alliance of Central Virginia
- ★ Peaceful Mediations
- ★ Providence Ministries

### Agency Spotlight



### Citizens for a Clean Lynchburg

- \* Citizens for a Clean Lynchburg (CCL) staff and volunteers provided on-site supervision to 61 Community Court participants sentenced to perform community service hours.
- \* Community Court participants completed over 125 hours of litter clean-up.

Citizens for a Clean Lynchburg is a non-profit, nonpartisan, and educational organization whose goal is to plan, implement, direct, and coordinate a litter control program that generates and promotes public interest in improving Lynchburg's environment. Citizens for a Clean Lynchburg also serves as a partner in helping the community reduce the amount of littering, increase the rate of recycling, and instilling in the citizens a sense of individual responsibility and pride which they hope will result in a cleaner, safer and more beautiful Lynchburg.

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