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Contact: [Steve Walker](#) (619) 843-7977
[Tanya Sierra](#) (619) 531-3315
En Español [Barbara Medina](#) (619) 531-3305

San Diego's Homeless Court Continues to be a Model for the Nation

Participation is Increasing, Approaching Pre-COVID 19 Levels

San Diego County District Attorney [Summer Stephan](#) said today that San Diego County's Homeless Court Program continues to be a model for the nation as out of state officials come to observe the monthly court sessions to learn and possibly implement a similar program in their region.

During the September Homeless Court Program graduation, the District Attorney, Public Defender, and Superior Court Judges from Multnomah County near Portland, Oregon, observed the unique court hearing that took place at the Center for Employment Opportunities where more than 50 previously unhoused individuals had their non-violent misdemeanor cases and fines dismissed and cleared.

"The Homeless Court Program graduation is a time to acknowledge the hard work that individuals experiencing homelessness undertook to accept and engage in services including treatment, education and job training to become productive members of society," said DA Stephan. "Homeless Court partners consider all the hours of treatment, community service, training, and education they have gone through to get their lives back on track. If they're being held back by infractions, traffic tickets, and minor offenses that took place because of their homeless circumstances, the court deems those fines and fees satisfied to remove hurdles so that they can obtain a driver's license, get a job, find housing, and continue a positive momentum through life."



[\[WATCH a video of the September Homeless Court Program, HERE\]](#)

The Homeless Court Program graduation in September was the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic that the program was near the maximum of 60 participants per month. There were over 50 participants, more than 200 separate cases and about

\$140,000 in fines and fees dismissed. Individuals often have multiple cases, such as one person who had over 50 cases of mostly trolley ticket violations.

“Homeless Court is not just a court session, it is a restart, a new beginning, for graduates to move forward in their life,” said Matthew Wechter, Public Defender Homeless Court Team and Court Liaison. “Instead of fines, fees, or jail time, Homeless Court dismisses cases and satisfies fines as a recognition of the hundreds of hours that these graduates have spent to address the root issues that brought them to the justice system in the first place. Our credo is: ‘You take a step; we take a step.’ Removing legal barriers of low-level cases, warrants, and fines is key to success when a person has taken those steps. The court is merely getting out of their way. San Diego continues to be an American Bar Association model jurisdiction to the nation - exemplifying the best practices and providing technical assistance to new programs across the country.”

The first Homeless Court Program in the nation began in San Diego in 1988 and it’s a collaboration between the San Diego County District Attorney’s Office, the Public Defender, the San Diego City Attorney, the Superior Court, and local service providers like the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), that refer individuals to the program.

“CEO is thankful to be part of this opportunity offering services to individuals across the community,” said Cambria O’Neill, Supportive Service Specialist for the Center for Employment Opportunities. “On average, 100 participants are submitted each year from CEO and Homeless Court Program continues to grow through support of CEO and other providers who are willing to be changemakers. More Homeless Court locations continue to pop up and more providers become approved to the network. We are one step closer to bringing people out of poverty and into a self-sufficient mindset.”

Angelica Sanchez was one of the participants who graduated from the Homeless Court Program in September, and she currently has a temporary job at the Center for Employment Opportunities. She is optimistic about her future now that the fines and fees she owed from trolley tickets will no longer be a barrier for her to get back on track.

“My goal is to get my driver’s license, to keep a clean driving record, to be able to travel and get a full-time job and also help provide for my mom, my siblings and my nieces and nephews,” Sanchez said.

To participate in the program, individuals need to be referred by one of the more than 100 approved Homeless Court Providers or have made progress on their own through a different program. Only misdemeanor cases that are non-violent in nature can be dismissed. For more information about the Homeless Court Program in San Diego, [click here](#).

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About the San Diego County District Attorney’s Office

The San Diego County DA’s Office prosecutes all felony crimes in the county and misdemeanor crimes committed outside the City of San Diego. The office files about 40,000 criminal cases a year and balances prosecution with numerous crime prevention programs. District Attorney Summer Stephan leads the office of more than 1,000 dedicated employees who pursue fair and equal justice, and support victims daily across San Diego County.