



COUNTY OF YOLO  
OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY  
JEFF W. REISIG, DISTRICT ATTORNEY

# NEIGHBORHOOD COURT YEAR-END REPORT



**An Innovative Initiative**  
**from the Office of District Attorney Jeff Reisig**



In 2013 the Yolo County District Attorney, in collaboration with the City of Davis and the University of California at Davis, began an innovative program based on the principles of Restorative Justice. The Yolo County Neighborhood Court Program (NHC) addresses nonviolent and low-level crimes through community-based solutions.

Neighborhood Court is an alternative to Criminal Court. Instead of charging cases for criminal prosecution, the District Attorney's Office may refer certain criminal cases (misdemeanors and infractions) to the panel of community volunteers who comprise the Neighborhood Court. The purpose of this program is to swiftly redress harms that impact the quality of life in our neighborhoods.

Neighborhood Court utilizes restorative justice concepts which identify crime as acts that cause harm to people and communities. The Program focuses on bringing the offender back into the community by focusing on the social harms caused by the offense rather than the crime itself. Emphasis is placed on the offender voluntarily accepting responsibility for their conduct and repairing the harm done to the victim and the community.

One goal of Neighborhood Court is for all parties to understand the root cause of the crime so that appropriate agreements can be entered into which help rehabilitate the offender and reduce the likelihood that the offensive conduct will be repeated.

Participants who successfully complete Neighborhood Court agreements have their case closed. This means they do not have an embarrassing and

potentially detrimental criminal conviction on their record that could impact future employment or licensing. Participants are able to quickly resolve their case instead of going through multiple expensive court appearances.

Ultimately, Neighborhood Court is a process that creates an opportunity for the victim, the offender and the community to communicate directly with each other in a safe environment. Here they can work towards repairing the harms in a way that will allow all the parties to move forward in a positive direction as equal members of the community. The pilot program administered by the District Attorney in the jurisdiction of Davis has been active and well received within the community by many stakeholders.

### **Eligibility and Statistics**

<b>NHC ELIGIBLE OFFENSES</b>
Public Intoxication
Noise Violation
Minor in Possession / False ID
Public Urination
Open Container in Public
Resisting Arrest
Petty Theft
Sale of Tobacco to Minor (w/ victim consent)
Battery/Trespassing/Vandalism

Neighborhood Court is designed to resolve cases restoratively and in the best interest of the victim and community. Only certain misdemeanor and infraction offenses are eligible for Neighborhood Court (see above). To be eligible for Neighborhood Court, an offender cannot be on probation or parole, or pending any other criminal charges.

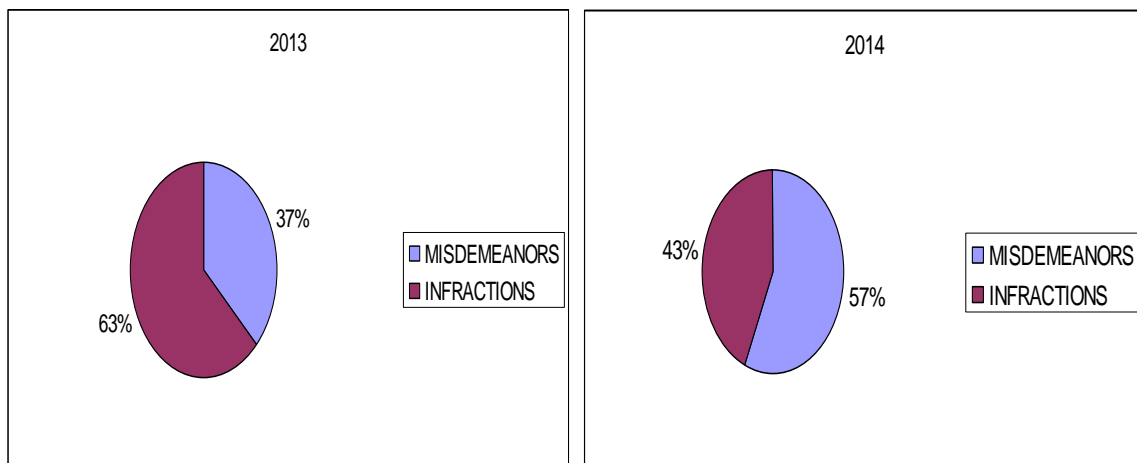
Neighborhood Court is primarily a first offender program, but has begun expanding its eligibility restrictions for transition aged youth (18-25) offenders, especially those with previous alcohol-based offenses and no history of violent crime. The goal of this expansion is to provide a restorative outcome which addresses the underlying issues that lead to multiple alcohol-based offenses and to educate the offender, with the aim of discouraging repeat offenses.

This year we have seen the inclusion of several participants with misdemeanor or infraction priors, some of whom had previously participated in Neighborhood Court. These offenders were deemed eligible on a case-by-case basis, with the goal of their inclusion being to provide an opportunity

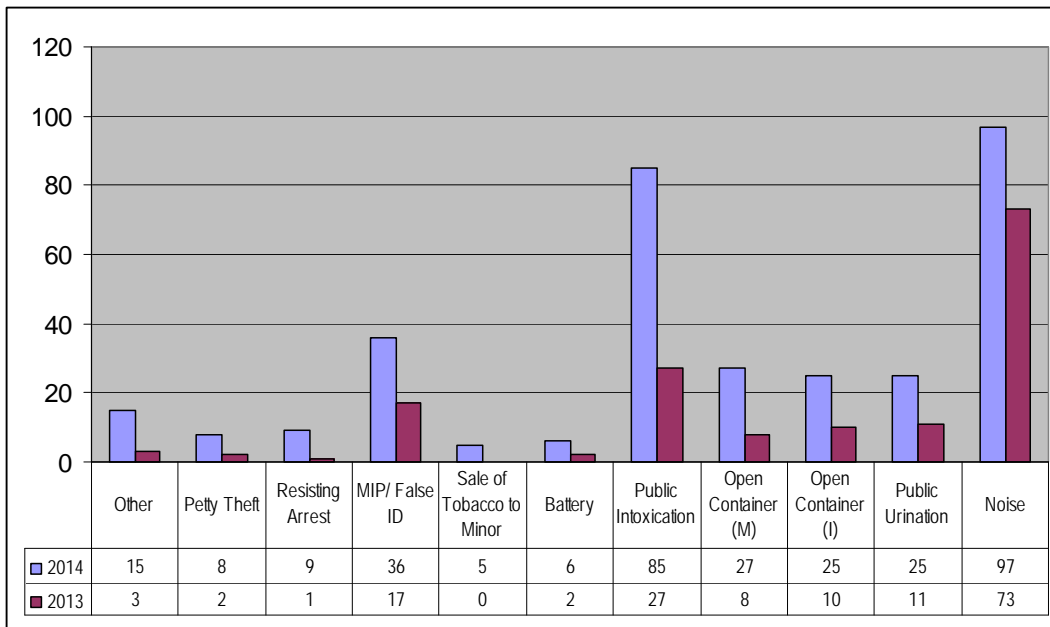
for more intensive education and counseling for their developing pattern of alcohol abuse. More than 50% of the offenders who participate in this program are cited for directly alcohol-related offenses, such as public intoxication or open container violations, and nearly 90% of the citations referred to Neighborhood Court involve alcohol in some capacity. Neighborhood Court allows participants an opportunity to undergo educational and counseling options for their alcohol issues. Such options are not currently available for these offenses in Criminal Court.

REFERRALS	DPD	UCD	OTHER	2014 TOTALS	2013 TOTALS
CONFERENCES HELD	267	54	17	338	154
PENDING COMPLETION	55	7	0	60	0
GRADUATED PROGRAM	208	45	17	272	150
FAILED PROGRAM	4	2	0	6	4

The case load for Neighborhood Court has continuously increased since the program's inception. In 2013 Neighborhood Court held 154 conferences. In 2014, the number of conferences more than doubled to 338. The types of offenses handled in the program have also shifted towards a greater proportion of misdemeanor offenses. The percentage of participants for misdemeanors has increased from 37% to 57%.



Neighborhood Court aims to provide restorative solutions for its growing case load and expanding range of violations, which include an increasing percentage of misdemeanor offenses, direct victim cases, and a high volume of noise violations.



### **Multi-Offender Noise Conferences**

From 2013-14, Neighborhood Court has seen 170 participants for noise citations alone. In an effort to efficiently handle this high volume offense type in a restorative and effective matter, a modified conference format with multiple offenders was introduced. These multi-offender noise conferences are held monthly, and managed by Neighborhood Court’s Legal Secretary.

The multi-offender noise conference includes a Facilitator, two Panelists, and 6-10 offender participants who have all received citations for noise violations. The aim of these group sessions is to create a real sense of community between offenders and Panelists. The offenders, with guidance provided by the Panelists, are provided a forum for exploring the communal effects and harms of this offense through group discussion, while also allowing them to share their own personal experiences. The Facilitator and Panelists help provide clear preventative options and tools for noise management and avoidance of future violations.

With this format, multiple offenses can be addressed in a manner appropriate to the scope and scale of the offense, while still allowing an opportunity for community restoration. This helps manage the high case volume while still maintaining a focus on restorative outcomes.

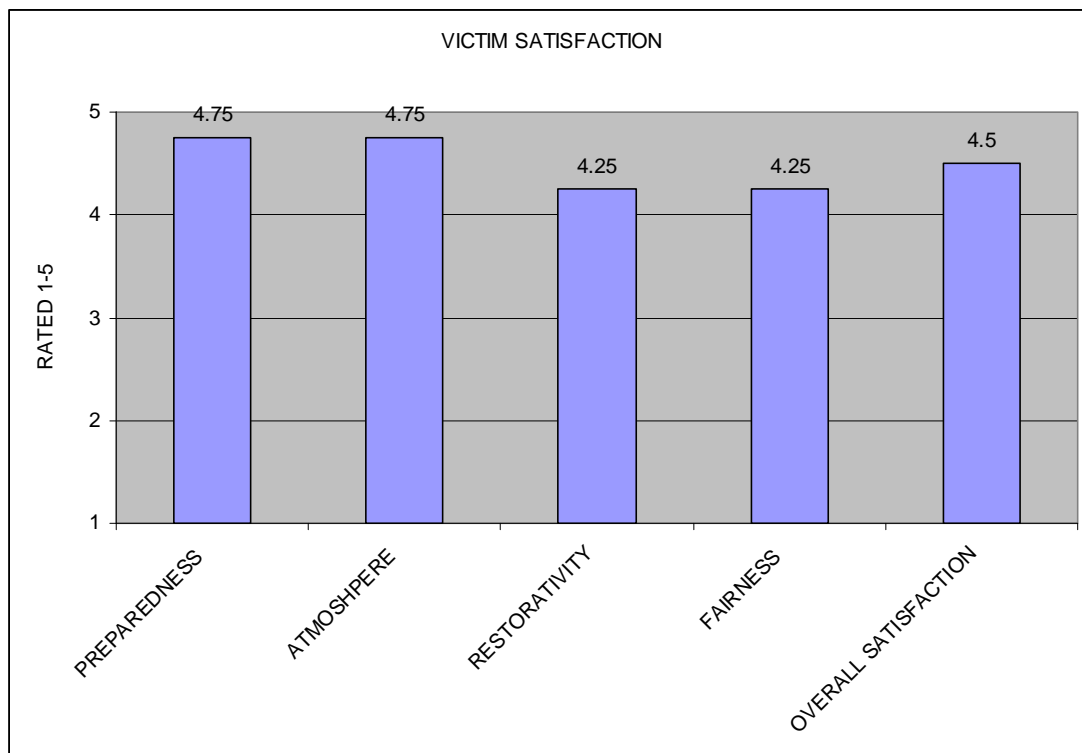
### **Direct Victim Participation**

In cases where individual citizens are the victim of a crime, such as battery, theft, vandalism, or trespassing, the primary goal of Neighborhood Court is

to change the focus from the defendant to the victim, to make the process more victim-centric.

When a victim chooses to participate in the Neighborhood Court program through a direct victim-offender conference, they are given the opportunity to express directly to the offender how they were personally affected by the offender's criminal conduct. They also participate in the creation of the agreement that will determine how the offender repairs the harm caused by their criminal offenses.

Research suggests these conferences between victim and offender have the highest rates of victim satisfaction, offender accountability and the lowest levels of recidivism. Following each Neighborhood Court conference, surveys are distributed to all participants asking them to rate their levels of satisfaction based on five key tenants of the program: preparedness, atmosphere, restorativity, fairness, and overall satisfaction. Tracking these surveys allows for program accountability, and provides a concrete means of identifying areas that need improvement.



Moving forward, the goal for Neighborhood Court is to increase victim participation and provide more options for victim involvement. The aim in this is to increase the ability to reach an agreement that the victim feels is fair and fully restorative. Neighborhood Court is working in partnership with the Yolo County Victim Services Unit in an effort to increase available modes of victim representation and assistance to victims interested in



participating in the program. Victim Services Advocates work alongside Neighborhood Court Attorneys to assist with contacting, tracking, and providing victim rights information to potential participating victims. They can also provide services as an advocate or surrogate for victims seeking modified means of participation.

One victim of a battery, who participated in a direct victim-offender conference with the Neighborhood Court program, stated: “I appreciate the positivity and space to be honest. The stage for my voice was more than viable.” This process gives victims a voice; not only to express the harms they have suffered and be acknowledged, but also to articulate what they need in order to repair those harms. Through this process victims have the opportunity to achieve an outcome that is truly restorative.

Victims, offenders and community members all sitting together and coming to an agreement on what is needed to repair the harms that have been caused by an offense embodies the mission of the Neighborhood Court program.

### **Our Partners and Service Providers**

Neighborhood Court is able to provide counseling and other program options to offenders through our partnership with reliable service providers such as the Center for Intervention (CFI) and UC Davis’ Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs (ATOD) program. CFI not only offers a variety of class and program options, they also manage the receipt and tracking of all offender agreement documents. ATOD offers conveniently accessible program options for students of UC Davis to analyze and address their alcohol management skills.

Recently, Neighborhood Court has embarked upon an exciting new partnership with Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). This will allow the program to better address the needs of non-student youth offenders cited for alcohol-related offenses by utilizing the Start Making a Right Turn (SMART) program and the MADD Victim Impact Panel (VIP). The SMART program is designed to educate youth about the dangers of underage drinking and driving under the influence, while VIP provides a forum for victims to help offenders understand the personal impact of their crimes.

These partnerships are vital to ensuring that the Neighborhood Court program has a diverse variety of restorative options available for use in the creation of agreements that truly address the harms caused by criminal offenses.



## **The Volunteers**

Volunteers play an integral role in the Neighborhood Court program. Community volunteers for Neighborhood Court serve as “Panelists” and “Facilitators.” Panelists are community residents from the affected communities who have agreed to meet with the parties involved in an effort to reach an agreement about how to repair the harm. Panelists have been trained in restorative justice principles and problem solving techniques. Facilitators are also trained community volunteers who serve as a type of mediator in the Neighborhood Court process involving the Panelists, the victim and the offender.

The volunteers are NOT defense attorneys, prosecutors, or judges. They are local residents, merchants, students, parents, and retired folks who are committed to improving the quality of life in their community.

Volunteers have taken initiative, informing themselves about the various factors and root causes for some of the most commonly seen offenses. During conferences, Panelists present their personal perspectives on harms caused by offenses while maintaining a safe and honest environment for the offender-participants to reach a truly restorative agreement. Volunteer Facilitators conscientiously manage conferences, and have spearheaded the mentoring of incoming volunteers, sharing openly from their collected wealth of knowledge.

The volunteer-centric Neighborhood Court conference model makes those who donate their time to the program truly indispensable for the sustainability and continuation of this program. As Neighborhood Court progresses towards a regular schedule of volunteer recruitment and training sessions to build a sustainable pool of community volunteers, it is impossible to ignore the selfless work and dedication of the foundational and current volunteers, without whom none of this would be possible.



## **Volunteer Recruitment and Training**

The foundational Neighborhood Court volunteers were vital to the initial implementation of this program, and their experience and involvement has been instrumental in continued recruitment and training efforts. However, it is also clear that in order to remain sustainable as the program expands, maintaining a large and diverse pool of volunteers is a necessity.

In the interest of recruiting an increasingly diverse group of volunteers, Neighborhood Court has enacted a variety of grass-roots recruitment efforts. These include attendance at local Farmers Markets, Community Informational sessions, Social Media utilization, and presentations at local universities, churches and community groups.

Additionally, Neighborhood Court has partnered with a local non-profit to offer regular training opportunities for new recruits. These trainings cover the basic principles of Restorative Justice, a detailed program description, 1 and 2-day training sessions on the Panelist and Facilitator volunteer roles, respectively, practical application, observation, and mentoring. Following completion of training, Neighborhood Court has also taken steps to improve communication with active volunteers to increase their ability to effectively contribute to the program.

## **Stakeholders' Meetings and Advisory Board**

As part of a continued effort to expand and improve communication and collaboration amongst all parties involved in the Neighborhood Court program, regular Stakeholders Meetings were initiated in the fall of 2014. The inaugural meeting took place on October 30<sup>th</sup>. The goal of these monthly meetings was two-fold: 1.) to provide a forum for discussion between Neighborhood Court / District Attorney staff and Neighborhood Court volunteers/stakeholders; and 2.) to discuss the development of an Advisory Board designed to address programmatic concerns.

The Yolo County District Attorney's Office invited Neighborhood Court volunteers to sit on an Advisory Board designed to tackle concerns brought forth regarding the Neighborhood Court program management, conferences, volunteer training, best practices, etc. Members of the Advisory Board will address issues brought forth by Neighborhood Court staff and volunteers and make recommendations geared toward the resolution of those concerns. Participants will meet monthly and are required to make a 12-18 month commitment. The purpose of the Advisory Board is to provide a concrete

system for hearing and resolving concerns amongst those with a stake in the sustainability of the Neighborhood Court program.

### **Neighborhood Court Staff**

Neighborhood Court staff has grown from a single managing Deputy District Attorney IV in 2013, to 3 full time staff members, in order to accommodate the growing case load and volunteer management requirements. The program is currently staffed by two Deputy District Attorneys and one Legal Secretary.

Since its original implementation in 2013, the program's case load has more than doubled and the number of active volunteers has more than tripled. The Davis case load and volunteer requirements alone are growing beyond the staff's capability to handle further program expansion. In an effort to more sustainably manage the program while continuing to grow and expand, in 2014, the District Attorney's Office applied for a grant to further fund the Neighborhood Court program.

### **JAG Grant Application**

The application for this grant was motivated by a developing need to address three major program goals: 1) Expansion into the cities of West Sacramento and Woodland 2) Need for a Manager/Coordinator of the volunteers who are critical to the success of the program 3) Need for a Social Worker Practitioner who will meet the needs of the offenders, particularly the homeless, to assist them in what is hoped to be a successful transformation once they are held accountable for their actions.

The additional funding provided through this grant would allow the District Attorney's Office to expand the Program to the cities of West Sacramento and Woodland. The grant would also allow the District Attorney to expand the Program scope and ability to handle the needs of both volunteers and participants.



### **Expansion: West Sacramento and Woodland**

Expansion into Woodland and West Sacramento is a future Neighborhood Court program goal. Pending grant funding approval, regular training sessions, as well as ongoing recruitment efforts will provide the resources to begin training new volunteers and laying the foundation for future program expansion.

West Sacramento promises a new focus on primarily resource-based offenses and participants who face more advanced socio-economic challenges than those previously seen in Davis. These differences necessitate increased resources and an adjustment in how both staff and volunteers manage and interact with participants. Similar assumptions can be made regarding prospective program expansion into the City of Woodland.

Success in expansion requires not only extensive grass roots community outreach efforts, supportive cooperation from city governments, and multiple volunteer training opportunities, but also motivation and resourcefulness on behalf of the inaugural volunteers in the community. Limited numbers are to be expected at the outset, and will necessitate coordination of schedules, duties, information, and resources, as processes are smoothed out through time and practice.

Neighborhood Court looks forward to the new and diverse opportunities Woodland and West Sacramento present for this program's continued pursuit of restorative solutions to crime.