



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE  
OF THE COURTS  
455 Golden Gate Avenue  
San Francisco, CA  
94102-3688  
Tel 415-865-4200  
TDD 415-865-4272  
Fax 415-865-4205  
[www.courtinfo.ca.gov](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov)

## FACT SHEET

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October 2006

### California Homeless Courts

Homeless courts are special court sessions, often held in a local shelter or other community site designed for homeless citizens. They help resolve outstanding misdemeanor criminal cases and warrants.

Homeless people tend to be fearful of attending court, yet their outstanding warrants limit their reintegration into society, deterring them from using social services and impeding their access to employment. They are effectively blocked from obtaining driver's licenses, job applications, and rental agreements. Resolution of outstanding warrants not only meets a fundamental need of homeless people but also eases court case-processing backlogs.

#### Development of Homeless Courts

In 1989 the first homeless court was established as an outgrowth of San Diego's Veterans' Stand-Down Program. That program annually offers services to homeless veterans. The San Diego Homeless Court meets monthly, alternately at Saint Vincent de Paul Village (San Diego's largest homeless shelter) and at the Veterans Village of San Diego residential facility. In 2006, the court was recognized by the Innovations in American Government Award from the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

The Ventura court's work was presented at the 2002 National Association for Court Management Conference and was awarded the Ralph N. Kleps Award for Improvement in the Administration of the Courts. Special court sessions held in the community by the Ventura court address outstanding cases as well as the unique problems of criminally accused homeless individuals. This approach reduces the need for numerous hearings, saving both court time and costs.

The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) conducted an evaluation that noted the resolution of more than 700 cases (for 266 participants) between October 1999 and February 2001. Data collected from participant surveys suggest that individuals' participation in the homeless court program improved their attitudes toward law enforcement and increased their satisfaction with court processes, court staff, and the court system as a whole.

Currently there are 14 homeless courts in California counties: Alameda, Contra Costa, Fresno, Humboldt, Kern, Los Angeles, Orange, Sacramento, San Bernardino,

San Diego, San Joaquin, Santa Clara, Sonoma and Ventura. Many of these courts provide specialized services for homeless veterans and have been recognized for their unique contribution. These courts combine plea bargaining with alternative sentencing that substitutes counseling, volunteer work, and participation in agency programs for the traditional fines, public work service, and custody. Defendants are given credit for having entered a shelter, done volunteer work, or enrolled in Alcoholics Anonymous or other self-help and education programs.

#### Courts' Impact on Communities

Homelessness affects the entire community. In Los Angeles alone, the homeless population has been estimated to be as high as 90,000 individuals. Homeless individuals within Alameda County number approximately 6,215, 28 percent of whom are children in homeless families. Estimates are that 69 percent of that county's homeless population lives in the major cities of Berkeley and Oakland. Statewide, veterans are thought to comprise 40 percent of the homeless. California's homeless courts reflect a partnership between the courts, justice system partners (such as the American Bar Association's Commission on Homelessness and Poverty), service providers, community groups, and the homeless to address a common concern.

#### Contact:

Nancy Taylor, Supervising Court Services Analyst, Center for Families, Children & the Courts, [nancy.taylor@jud.ca.gov](mailto:nancy.taylor@jud.ca.gov)

#### Additional resources:

Collaborative Justice Program: Homeless Courts

[www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/collab/homeless.htm](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/collab/homeless.htm)

[www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/collab/documents/homelesscourts.pdf#search=%22California%20Homeless%20courts%22](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/collab/documents/homelesscourts.pdf#search=%22California%20Homeless%20courts%22)

Alameda's Homeless Court Sessions

[www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/collab/documents/Homeless\\_Court\\_Press\\_Release.pdf](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/collab/documents/Homeless_Court_Press_Release.pdf)

San Diego's Homeless Court

[www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/collab/documents/TakingittotheShelter.pdf](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/collab/documents/TakingittotheShelter.pdf)

California Department of Veterans Services, Homeless Court

[www.cdva.ca.gov/homeless/court.asp](http://www.cdva.ca.gov/homeless/court.asp)

American Bar Association

[www.abanet.org/homeless/HCP\\_Manual.pdf](http://www.abanet.org/homeless/HCP_Manual.pdf)

[www.abanet.org/homeless/HCP\\_Conference\\_Coursebook.pdf](http://www.abanet.org/homeless/HCP_Conference_Coursebook.pdf)

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