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San Diego's Community Justice Initiative

Background

In 2014, the San Diego City Attorney, in partnership with the San Diego County Public Defender, San Diego County Sheriff's Department, and two non-profit service providers – Urban Corps of San Diego County and Alpha Project, created the Community Justice Initiative (CJI). CJI, a post-plea diversion program for individuals who have committed lower level offenses, provides an opportunity for defendants to pay their debt back to the community through targeted work service and other conditions. When defendants successfully complete program requirements, they have their case dismissed.

One year after implementation, the City Attorney's Office partnered with SANDAG and successfully competed for a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), that enabled the partners to enhance and expand the program, as well as to use data to inform program decisions and have SANDAG conduct a process and outcome evaluation. The four BJA-funded expansion goals included (1) conducting standardized assessments with clients to understand risk and need; (2) improving linkages of clients to service providers; (3) strengthening the current documentation effort to ensure decisions and strategies are informed by data; and (4) engaging with the community to a greater degree. While the complete evaluation report is available [online](#), this CJ Summary highlights key findings from this study, with an emphasis on lessons learned.

How does CJI work?

As part of CJI, once a criminal complaint is filed, an offer to divert an eligible case to CJI is made at the initial Superior Court appearance. If rejected (participation is completely voluntary), the offer is withdrawn and the case proceeds through the normal process. If accepted, the defendant enters a guilty plea and accepts the CJI conditions, which include a referral to one of two non-profit agencies to complete 16 hours of community service (e.g. planting trees, recycling, removing graffiti, clearing neighborhoods of illegally dumped trash) and pay the administrative fee (\$120.00 at the time of the evaluation). For those who are unable to pay, indigent spots are available and require 8 hours of additional service in lieu of paying the administrative fee. The court then sets a sentencing date approximately 90 days later. If the offender successfully completes all conditions within the time allotted, the offender earns a dismissal of the case and the sentencing date is vacated administratively by the City Attorney, effectively requiring only one court appearance. If the offender fails to complete the conditions, the offender is sentenced to two days in jail and three years of summary probation, or alternatively, five days in jail and no probation. Funding through this grant was used to hire a CJI Program Coordinator to achieve expansion goals, provide case management services through Alpha Project to clients assessed as being at medium- to high-risk and need, and conduct a process and impact evaluation of the program.

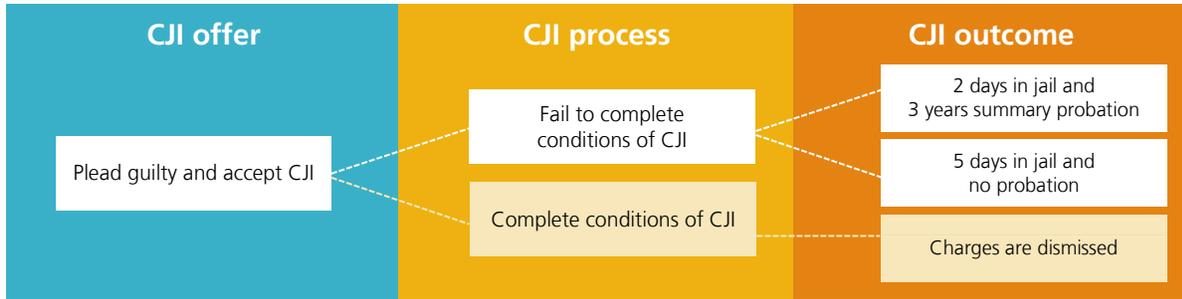
Why CJI?

Provide low-level offenders the opportunity to give back to the community and earn a dismissal of their case

Address underlying needs of low-level offenders that could lead to continued contact with the justice system

Allow the City Attorney's Office to focus more resources on high-level offenders through reduced involvement with the courts by successful CJI participants

Flow of the CJJ process



What are the characteristics of CJJ clients?

Data regarding assessed risk and in some cases need, as well as service provision and recidivism outcomes were available for 605 CJJ clients who participated in the enhanced program between April 2016 and October 2017. The median age of these clients was 27 (range 18 – 78), and while three in every five were male, females represented a greater proportion of these individuals, compared to the traditional justice-involved population. In addition, the clients were ethnically diverse, one in three reported no prior arrests, and another two in three were rated as very low to low/medium risk on the Proxy risk assessment. The greatest needs of these clients related to criminal thinking, financial status, residential instability, and substance abuse.

Client characteristics



59%
male



age



36% no prior arrest

68% rated very low to low/medium risk to recidivate

Greatest client needs



Criminal thinking
30%



Residential instability
29%



Financial
27%



Substance abuse
24%

What happened to clients who participated in CJI?

- Around 4 in every 5 clients tracked (83%) for the evaluation successfully completed program requirements.
- Of those who failed to complete, around half (49%) failed to complete the community service and also failed to make the required payment.
- Two client characteristics were associated with the probability of successfully completing – risk on the Proxy (with those who were higher risk less likely to complete) and having a prior booking or conviction (less likely to complete).
- Case managed clients received a median of three services, which most often included life skills training (87%) and individual counseling (72%).
- Almost all of CJI clients who completed an exit survey during the evaluation period rated their experience as either “great” (79%) or “good” (18%).

Was recidivism lowered for CJI clients?

- CJI clients overall, regardless of exit status, were significantly less likely to be arrested and convicted (both 11%) in the 12-months following participation, in comparison to a matched historical control group (17% and 16%).
- The 12-month follow-up arrest and conviction rates for CJI clients who successfully completed the program was 6 percent and 7 percent, respectively, compared to 37 percent and 32 percent for those who did not.

What were some lessons learned that could be helpful to other sites?

- Engaging clients in a voluntary program, even when they have unmet needs can be challenging, with only about 2 in every 5 individuals eligible for an additional assessment to receive case management accepting the opportunity. Warm hand offs and the resources necessary to engage clients are important to ensure underlying risks and needs can be met.
- Flexibility is key. Throughout the project the partners communicated regularly and were open to changing policies and procedures to ensure an effective and efficient program.
- Information sharing needs to be emphasized and an ongoing priority. Because of competing priorities of those responsible for data collection, there were gaps in the information received for the evaluation and to inform decisions. Reliable data collection takes ongoing attention and effort.

Evaluation highlights

36% of clients no prior arrest

29% rated as high need for residential instability

83% successfully completed the program

Those rated as lower risk and with no prior criminal history were more likely to successfully complete

79% of surveyed clients described the program as “great”

11% of client were convicted in the 12-month follow-up period, less than the comparison group

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