



Judicial Branch of Arizona in Maricopa County

Contact:

Clara Colmenero, PIO

c.colmenero@jbazmc.maricopa.gov

(602) 372-0874

Valley's Regional Homeless Court Celebrates 10-year Anniversary

Court has helped more than 1,700 people resolve misdemeanor offenses, warrants

PHOENIX (December 14, 2022) – Individuals experiencing homelessness are receiving support to change their situation by participating in the Maricopa County Regional Homeless Court, part of the Judicial Branch of Arizona in Maricopa County. This problem-solving court helps eligible members of the public resolve minor misdemeanor offenses and quash warrants that have served as barriers to securing housing, employment and reinstating their driver's license.

"The Maricopa County Regional Homeless Court was developed 10 years ago as a collaboration among three city courts in the Valley: Phoenix, Tempe and Glendale municipal court. They got together and decided they wanted to help the homeless population," said the Hon. James Hernandez, a Phoenix Municipal Court judge and Maricopa County Regional Homeless Court chair. "However, they ran into some obstacles because they could only handle cases within their courts at the time, so they went on a venture to truly make this a regional homeless court."

Homeless Court was initially developed in 2006 but expanded into the Regional Homeless Court in 2012 in partnership with the Limited Jurisdiction Courts. Since then, over 1,700 individuals have completed more than 660,000 hours in community restitution to help resolve their cases. Those who voluntarily participate in the program work with their case manager to complete community restitution hours, which can include self-improvement, education and job training. Currently, one hour of community restitution resolves \$13 in fines.

"With the clients who I advocate for and help with the process, it is being able to determine if they are eligible based on the cases they have," said Shira Zias, Lodestar Day Resource Center case manager and Maricopa County Regional Homeless Court advocate. "I ask the clients what they see as some of the leading causes that caused their homelessness and then we talk about goals that reflect that. The common theme throughout most of my clients' stories is some sort of healthy support to be able to provide them with some resiliency or a back-up plan. As an example, the situation could be domestic violence and lack of support, or I got evicted and I didn't have any savings and lack of support."

At the Regional Homeless Court, cases are combined and heard at the same time. To participate, members of the public must demonstrate a commitment to changing their living situation and seek a

referral from a participating community service provider. Their cases must be non-violent and victimless offenses. Examples of eligible cases are parking, traffic, loitering, trespassing and other “quality of life” offenses.

“Many of the people who are in this program have tickets or unpaid fines from different courts around the Valley and they may not be near each other,” Judge Hernandez said. “So, we needed collaboration from courts all around the Valley to help these people.”

In Maricopa County, more than 9,000 people are experiencing homelessness. According to the Maricopa Association of Government’s 2022 point-in-time count, the number of people experiencing homelessness has increased 22% in the last two years. The homeless population includes people who are in transitional housing, an emergency shelter or safe haven program.

“Superior Court Presiding Judge Norm Davis brought these city and justice courts together and we talked a lot about the opportunity to share the authority so we can trust another judge to resolve those other matters and they came to those agreements, and I think it’s a huge example of genuine collaboration,” said Marcus Reinkensmeyer, deputy director of the Arizona Administrative Office of the Courts and part of the initial project team.

Regional Homeless Court is held every third Tuesday of the month at the Lodestar Day Resource Center at the Human Services Campus, 1125 W. Jackson Street in Phoenix. The next session is scheduled for 1:30 p.m. on Dec. 20.

“The Human Services Campus provides this space, this classroom for the Homeless Court to convene once a month. It’s a big deal to have a space for people to be and we have a lot of clients who access services here that benefit from Homeless Court which makes it more convenient,” said Amy Schwabenlender, executive director of the Human Services Campus. “Being where the people are who need this service is a tremendous value to everybody.”

During the last two years, Regional Homeless Court hearings were conducted virtually. But since July, hearings have returned to in-person with an option of appearing virtually for those who prefer it.

“A warrant for a failure to pay can prevent you from getting into housing and quashing warrants became part of the Regional Homeless Court,” said Will Gonzalez, the Phoenix Municipal Court’s executive administrator, who assisted in the development of the Maricopa County Regional Homeless Court. “It’s stabilizing people and giving them that opportunity to move forward. For those who graduate from the Regional Homeless Court, to get there they have restored themselves, but they had to use initiative of their own. It’s an opportunity of dignity of really restoring people, it’s that dignity and respect we all want.”

Please R.S.V.P to attend the December 20 hearing by contacting: C.Colmenero@jbazmc.maricopa.gov.

###

The Judicial Branch of Arizona in Maricopa County is comprised of Superior Court, Adult Probation and Juvenile Probation, which includes juvenile detention. The Judicial Branch in Maricopa County is the

fourth largest trial court system in the nation and, along with its 3,100 employees, is dedicated to providing a safe, fair and impartial forum for resolving disputes, enhancing access to services, and providing innovative, evidence-based practices that improve the safety of the community and ensure the public's trust and confidence in the Judicial Branch. For more information, visit superiorcourt.maricopa.gov.