

Health, Housing, and Justice Alliance

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| Acknowledgements | |
| Table of Contents | |
| Executive Summary | 3 |
| Project History and Goals | 5 |
| Planning Steps and Facilitating Partnerships | 6 |
| Health, Housing, and Justice Outreach Events: The Pilot | 8 |
| Initial Outcomes from Outreach Events | 9 |
| Partner Feedback, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations | 10 |
| Conclusion | 12 |
| Endnotes | |

Executive Summary

As the COVID-19 pandemic forced organizations and institutions to shift to operating remotely, disparities driven by the digital divide became a shared problem across major cross-sector systems important to a community's well-being. The Health, Housing, and Justice Alliance sought to eliminate inequities of fully virtual legal, healthcare, and social services through the creation of pop-up navigation centers and court hubs throughout Newark, New Jersey.

General Objectives and Outcomes

The project had three main objectives: (1) promote equitable access to services in healthcare, housing, and the legal system; (2) deliver services effectively across these systems; and (3) strengthen system integration through authentic community and provider partnerships. Over an eight-week period, the Alliance convened two strategic planning meetings, conducted six outreach events, and facilitated two pop-up virtual court "hubs" within the community. A total of 84 people attended the outreach events where they were able to interact with providers who specialized in healthcare, housing, public benefits, identification, health insurance enrollment, and legal navigation services. Housing assistance was the most requested service followed by legal navigation assistance. Individuals who required legal navigation assistance had legal matters which spanned 22 jurisdictions across eight counties in New Jersey. Event attendees were also able to receive preventative health screens and schedule appointments with primary care physicians.

Key Takeaways

What started as a project driven by the unique demands of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed opportunities for broader systemic change and to reimagine how institutions and organizations interface with the community. The project laid the foundation for future collaboration and intentional outreach and engagement practices in Essex County, New Jersey. Specifically, cross-sector representation and real-time, onsite service delivery are powerful methods of engagement, allowing event attendees to make tangible progress towards their goals and strengthening their relationship for follow-up care. Combined, these lessons can shape future work in Essex County and beyond, maximizing the reach and impact of the organizations involved.

Invest in People with Lived Experiences

Including people with lived experience at the outset of the project was invaluable. Starting with strategic planning and throughout the implementation phase of the project, current and former service consumers helped design the outreach events, recruit attendees, and encourage event participation. Participatory budgeting with community members allowed the Alliance to allocate funds and ensured that individuals were compensated for their contributions to the project, which was critical to success.

Strengthen Connections between Municipal and Superior Courts

The relationships between stakeholders at the municipal and superior courts had a direct impact on the success of legal services navigation. Many attendees from outreach events had multiple outstanding legal matters which spanned courts and jurisdictions. Given the range of participants' legal needs, courts should consider working together regionally in these outreach efforts as there will be overlap between both active cases and cases with outstanding fines.

Coordinate Access to Healthcare Information within Shelters

During events at emergency shelters, healthcare partners saw that many attendees were unaware of the outpatient health services available to them through University Hospital in Newark, NJ. Healthcare partners

should provide shelters with multilingual, written materials about the medical services and continue to co-locate service delivery as provided through the outreach events. Being able to walk away from the event with a scheduled primary care appointment was a concrete, hassle-free resource provided to attendees.

Go Small, Go Often

As opposed to large-scale social service fairs, these outreach efforts were smaller events that occurred more often and required much less planning. This format allowed the Alliance to cover a wider geographic range, deliver services directly to people where they live, and build familiarity through consistent community presence without disruption to the surrounding environment. Dedicating funding and setting performance measures to support this style of outreach can help service collectives like the Alliance to maximize their presence and impact within communities.

Housing and Public Assistance Service Navigation is Critical

Housing services was the top requested service among attendees but also the most difficult system of care to navigate in real time. Generally, the resources which were most appreciated by event attendees were ones which resulted in some immediate service, like a completed application or scheduled appointment. It was these concrete service offerings which created the cohesive environment and cross-sector atmosphere. The ability for agencies to complete both housing and public benefits applications in the community is essential to the success of this model as many resources and services are contingent upon one another. To maximize impact of community engagement, current agencies which manage housing vouchers and public benefits must include providing direct care in the community as part of their outreach process.

For More Information

Contact Kelly Mulligan, Director of New Jersey Programs, at mulligank@courtinnovation.org.

Project History and Goals

The Health, Housing, and Justice Alliance (the Alliance) is a collective of social service organizations, healthcare providers, criminal justice entities, and community members which sought to eliminate access barriers to virtual services and court processes during the pandemic. Inspired by Newark Community Solutions' Virtual Court Accessibility Project, which created a community-based court "hub" in a local homeless shelter during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Alliance coordinated outreach efforts across Newark, New Jersey, bringing services directly to people who were unsheltered or at risk of losing their housing to maximize engagement and deliver care.

Like many organizations, COVID-19 completely altered how Newark Community Solutions operated within the court system. A project of the Center for Court Innovation based in the Newark Municipal Court, Newark Community Solutions provides alternatives to incarceration and fines and fees for low-level offenses through social services and community services based out of their in-house clinic. As Newark Community Solutions adjusted to remote operations, there were concerns for clients who could not be reached virtually. At the same time, the City of Newark, Essex County, and community-based organizations were addressing similar issues within the housing system from a different vantage point.



When the City of Newark's emergency homeless shelter at a local hotel opened, Newark Community Solutions coordinated with the Salvation Army, the contracted case management provider for the new shelter, and the Newark Municipal Court to hold virtual court sessions at the hotel.

The collaboration revealed how the courts and social service providers have common goals in both reaching and working with those who have limited access to technology. The Virtual Court Accessibility Project's success was entirely dependent on relationships with other sectors, so when funding through the Clinical Scholars Program became available, it was an opportunity to bring together all stakeholders to form the Health, Housing, and Justice Alliance to best understand how to build and deliver services under the constraints of COVID-19 restrictions through continued coordination and collaboration.

Through the creation of pop-up navigation centers throughout Essex County, this project sought to:

- **Increase access to virtual services** for people with lack of access to internet/technology
- **Provide clients with services** such as preventative healthcare, legal system navigation assistance, and benefit enrollment—including housing assistance
- **Strengthen partnerships** in Essex County across three major anchor systems: the healthcare, social service, and legal systems
- **Increase system integration** through the development of a cross-sector action plan to expand service accessibility

Planning Steps and Facilitating Partnerships

In line with the “quality processes”¹ principle of authentic partnership, the planning team engaged in two virtual strategic planning meetings with multidisciplinary partners. The meeting times were selected by surveying partners’ availability and selecting the dates that worked best for most partners to emphasize the need for all voices to be in the room for the collaborative initiative to be successful.

Partners included key decision-making representatives from:

- Municipal Court
- Office of the Public Defender
- Court-Based Social Service Agency
- Healthcare providers from local hospital and medical school
- Current and Former Service Consumers
- Social service agencies that provide:
 - Public benefits enrollment
 - Food assistance
 - Long-term case management
 - Identification services
 - Transportation
 - Employment services
 - Mental health services
 - Substance use treatment
 - Emergency housing
 - Permanent housing
 - Rental assistance

Two strategic planning meetings happened in the winter of 2021: the first serving as a level-setting introduction to the project and each other and the second focusing specifically on logistical details for the events. While many of the providers involved have worked in similar spaces and were engaged in some collaborative initiatives, we learned that partners were not as familiar with some of the COVID-19 adaptations, barriers, and opportunities



their colleagues were balancing since so much was in flux in the months leading up to the planning process.

The first strategic planning meeting had three areas of focus: 1) provide a summary of Virtual Court Accessibility Project, which inspired this pilot program; 2) share an overview of the major goals; and 3) encourage provider partners to introduce the services they offer and areas for increased collaboration and resource sharing between partners. The meeting outlined the project timeline, event service flow, and next steps for planning the logistics of the outreach event. Most of the first strategic planning meeting was spent reviewing each partner agency’s strengths, barriers, and their capacity (virtual or in person) to engage in future outreach events.

The second strategic planning meeting was focused on the logistics of planning the outreach events. The majority of the time was spent in pre-assigned breakout groups with facilitated discussion points so that planning facilitators could tap into the expertise of each partner.

The group makeups were as follows:

- **Health partners** from University Hospital’s Community and Population Health Department and Rutgers Medical School were tasked with reviewing on-site and virtual health services. It was decided that there would be blood pressure and glucose checks and referrals to primary care physicians. Two outreach events were held outside of Newark Penn Station where the City of Newark facilitated COVID-19 vaccine distribution, so the Alliance coupled its health services with that opportunity.

■ **Community-based service provider partners** were tasked with identifying possible event locations based on where the target population was typically located, where there would be sufficient foot traffic, and dates and times that may work for providers and participants. This group discussed the importance of having indoor and outdoor events, having locations near public transportation, and facilitating events during hours when people felt comfortable traveling. Several of the partners were engaged with the Street Outreach Committee, a subgroup within the Essex County Comprehensive Emergency Assistance System/Continuum of Care (CEAS/CoC), and were looking for opportunities to engage in in-person outreach events. Therefore, they were willing to either host an event or spread the word about the Alliance outreach events across their networks and the populations they worked with.

■ **City and county housing and public assistance partners** were tasked with reviewing the typical housing placement and service referral process to

create a decision-making tree. This group worked on a graphic so that individuals assigned to screen participants for needs would know which agencies to call based on the person's residency status and other flagged needs.

Following the strategic planning, several smaller meetings were conducted by the Center and Newark Community Solutions team to finalize an action plan with individual tasks assigned, goals and their deadlines set, and individual outlines for each outreach event developed. There were several planning tools and organizational resources to assess service provider availability (in person vs. remote), outreach event flow charts so people could visualize how participants would move through the events, data collection tools to track participant information, and releases of information. All documents were stored and organized within a Google Drive folder that was accessible to all partners throughout the duration of both the planning and implementation phases.



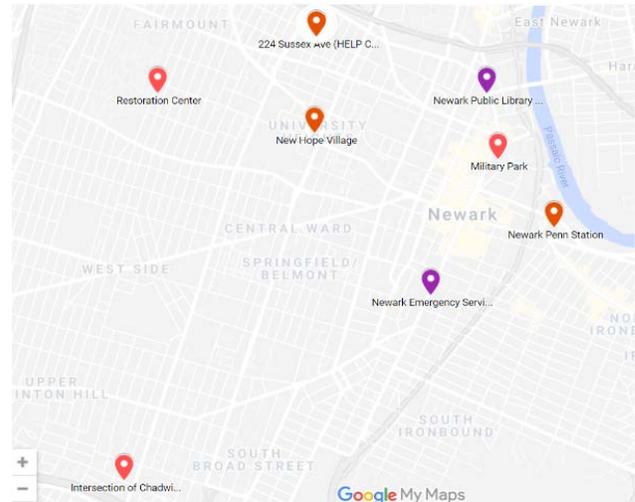
Health, Housing, and Justice Alliance Outreach Events: The Pilot

The success of the project was due in part to the participation and leadership of credible messengers, local activists, and organizers rooted in the communities the Alliance aimed to serve who could offer critical perspectives and insight during organizing and outreach efforts. These individuals have lived experience with homelessness and interaction with service providers, the benefits process, and the challenges with navigating the intersecting systems that the Alliance’s target population was also facing. Almost half of the project’s budget included funding for credible messenger stipends to compensate them for their time, expertise, and assistance with rapport-building. Former service consumers were represented on the planning team, canvassing efforts, and event facilitation. At events, people with lived experience in the system helped participants navigate the events, answering questions, and vouching for the services and effectiveness of the outreach efforts.

All attendees were provided with “participant passports.” The passport was a piece of paper divided into service categories: health, housing, public benefits, legal, and other. When a participant endorsed a particular need in one of those areas, they were given a pre-populated label with the contact information of the respective agency which could provide assistance. They were then pointed to tables where they could receive detailed information. Passports were provided in a waterproof pocket folder. As many participants were unhoused, ensuring that they had one space to organize resources and protect them from the elements was a priority. The passport ensured participants had a summary of what was discussed at the event and could then follow up with providers on their own.

Outreach Event and Virtual Court Hub Locations

The Health, Housing, and Justice Access Alliance hosted six in-person outreach events across the City of Newark.² Events were located at three emergency/transitional shelters, two public parks, and a major transit hub.



Initial Outcomes

Outreach Efforts

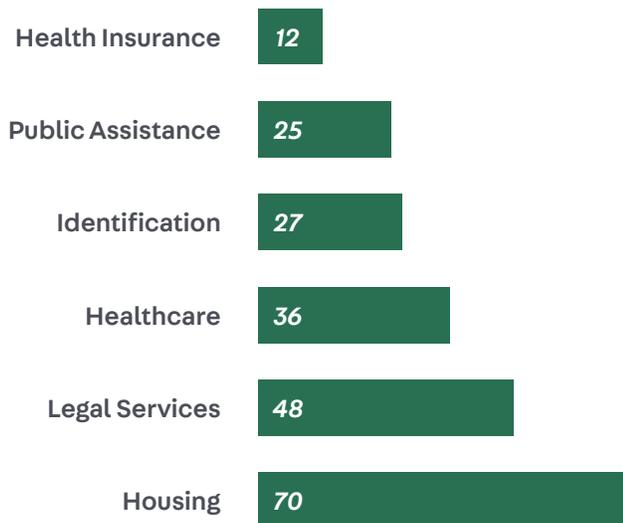
One goal identified during the planning process was to track participant engagement and resulting connections to services. Many partners indicated how service events often had an immediate positive impact but lacked the cohesiveness required for a transition into more system-wide coordination of care. The planning team therefore drafted several different tools to track information provided by participants both to assess the reach of the event but also to do continued follow up with individuals.

During the six outreach events,³ the Alliance checked-in and provided services to 84 people.

- HELP Center: 21 individuals
- Newark Hope Village: 18
- Restoration Center: 18
- Newark Penn Station: 11
- Military Park: 9
- Chadwick and Hawthorne: 7

SERVICES REQUESTED

84 people checked in



Most attendees requested assistance in multiple service areas. Having multiple providers representing different service sectors on site and on-call allowed partners to guide event attendees to the spaces which would best attend to all of their needs in a single place. For example, securing identification documentation is a prerequisite of many public assistance and housing applications, so coordinating with the two onsite providers who could quickly assist with securing identification allowed for a more streamlined process.

« You need more people that have lived the experience or are still living the experience to say [to participants] 'Hey, you need to come out.' My Alliance partner and I had both been in a state of homelessness, that's how we met. So people knew us and when we said 'come out, this is to benefit you,' people trusted us.

— THERESA PRINGLE, Pringle's Pit Stop

Virtual Court Hubs

As part of the project, Newark Community Solutions and the Newark Municipal Court facilitated two virtual court dates at community hubs: one in April and the second in May. The Newark Municipal Court selected two court dates for a dedicated calendar for any event attendees who had active matters or money owed in the Newark Municipal Court. Newark Emergency Services for Families and the Newark Public Library then agreed to act as virtual court “hubs” and host the court dates.

Partner Feedback, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations

1. Invest in People with Lived Experiences

One aspect of the project that proved to be particularly valuable was the advocacy work of the credible messengers. Through authentic partnership, the Alliance was able to establish trust and expand its reach in the community. We relied heavily on our local advocates and service consumers to raise awareness and attendance for the events. Participatory budgeting allowed us to work directly with the community when designing and conducting outreach.

An aspect of our planning that gradually improved due to collaboration with the current and former service consumers was selecting the timing of programming. Community partners overwhelmingly praised the selected locations of in-person events. Remarking on the fourth event at Military Park, a staff member of Bridges Outreach stated that the event took place in a “good location because it was very visible, and we attracted many people who may not have even known about the event.” The lived experience of credible messengers was crucial in determining which locations would garner the most traffic and engagement. One of the first events, held at Newark Penn Station, took place from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m., which is a time that the group learned was impractical, in part because individuals facing housing insecurity were, according to a University Hospital Community Health worker, “trying to secure a spot to sleep by then.” Engaging with credible messengers bolstered the Alliance’s ability to work with and around the needs of the community and to adapt the outreach events to be responsive to the needs of clients. Accordingly, by the fifth event, the majority of feedback from partners was that the selected event times were one of the program’s greatest strengths.

RECOMMENDATION #1

Budgeting to compensate current/former service consumers with lived experience is critical to both the planning process and actual implementation of the outreach events. Identify flexible funding sources that allow social service agencies to work with messengers who assist with planning, canvassing for events, and helping participants navigate through the outreach events. While some people with lived experience may be employed by agencies organizing outreach, it is helpful to be able to use stipends to explicitly hire current service consumers as increased canvassing support before and during outreach efforts. These stipends could be managed by partners who are organizing events or by the shelters where outreach events frequently take place.

2. Facilitate Access to Court Practitioners Across Municipal and Superior Courts

Legal service navigation success was predicated on the relationship between Newark Community Solutions, the Office of the Public Defender, and the Newark Municipal Court. While Newark Community Solutions acted as conduit between criminal justice stakeholders and participants, the Office of the Public Defender provided all the pertinent open legal information to clients, and the court helped with scheduling and processing of identified cases. Partners indicated that legal service navigation that addressed older court matters with outstanding fines and fees and superior court cases, in addition to active municipal court matters, was critical for clients concerned about legal cases from years back. Often these legal matters were barriers to restoring driver’s licenses, securing housing or obtaining jobs. Some partners indicated that they were aware of the work Newark Community Solutions does but were not aware of the full extent of the services.

RECOMMENDATION #2

A successful partnership relies on communication between the municipal court and at least one agency at the superior court level, whether through the public defender's office or the court itself. Given the large geographic range of participants' legal needs, courts should consider working together regionally in these outreach efforts as there will be overlap between both active cases and cases with outstanding fines. Social service agencies or other court-based nonprofits, such as Newark Community Solutions, can serve as critical facilitators in this process.

3. Coordinate Access to Healthcare Information Within Shelters

Healthcare partners from University Hospital indicated that many of the emergency shelter residents they worked with had no knowledge of the outpatient services that the Ambulatory Care or Population Health departments provided. Partners brought informational materials including brochures and other handouts with contact information for participants to follow up. After the outreach events concluded, a community chaplain from University Hospital reached out to the core planning team asking for regular training on navigating the low-income housing application process for the rest of his staff.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Healthcare partners should provide shelters with multilingual, written materials about the medical services they offer and their hours of operation to supplement the services offered. These materials might be included in some kind of welcome packet distributed when a resident first enters the shelter, in addition to the healthcare partners having a more consistent physical presence at the shelter. Service provision at these smaller outreach efforts will also help to spread awareness of community health services.

4. Go Small, Go Often

The project demonstrated the power of coordinated, cross-sector community outreach through smaller scale, but frequent, outreach efforts.

Benefits included:

- Bringing services directly to people where they were instead of relying on referral-based care
- Expanding the geographic reach of the outreach efforts
- Providing a consistent community presence through high-frequency outreach

Frequent, smaller events proved extremely effective. Large scale events can take a lot of pre-planning coordination, and when attendance is high, providers do not have the time to speak with people who come to them beyond a quick rehearsed blurb and the sharing of a flyer. Over just six two-hour events, this project served at least 84 people—demonstrating that these regular smaller efforts were still able to bring in a wide range of community members.

RECOMMENDATION #4

Funding should be dedicated to support this style of outreach in which agencies work as a collective, as opposed to individual entities, at an event. This would require having a position or positions dedicated to the coordination and planning of these small, but frequent, community outreaches across the county. These individuals would be able to identify and collaborate with pre-existing events, reducing the need for each agency to spend valuable resources on building contacts and communicating with agencies when they wish to organize outreach.

5. Housing and Public Assistance Service Navigation is Critical

Housing services was the number one request of participants but also the most difficult system of care to navigate. Outreach in this arena must extend beyond distribution of flyers and brochures. The resources which were most appreciated by participants were ones which resulted in some immediate service (e.g., completing an application for mental health services, scheduling a doctor's appointment, or screening for legal matters). It was these concrete service offerings which created the cohesive environment and cross-sector atmosphere. The ability for agencies to complete both housing and public benefits applications in the community is essential to the success of this model as many resources and services are contingent upon one another.

RECOMMENDATION #5

The county's social service agencies and nonprofits with whom they contract should increase their presence in the community, with a focus on providing care directly at these events. This can include completing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program applications, starting applications for rental assistance, or completing applications for NJFamilyCare.

Conclusion

Over the course of the pilot project, the Alliance demonstrated the power of cross-sector collaboration, particularly when working with the county's hardest to reach individuals. To continue with this valuable work, leaders within the Newark/Essex County Comprehensive Emergency Assistance System/Continuum of Care (CEAS/CoC) should be supported in the coordination of these events; providers, particularly those who distribute housing and public assistance funding, must actively participate; and organizations hosting outreach and canvassing events must be able to easily communicate with the larger Alliance network about their events.

Based on the outcomes and feedback from this pilot, it is clear that outreach is vital to ensuring equitable access to services and that funding for a dedicated coordinator or lead facilitators to oversee and support the work of providers and events is critical to its continued success. Investment in this care coordination will address the gap in coordinating services between providers, prevent the duplication of services that occurs when multiple agencies are engaging a high-needs population, and sustain the data collection for this hard-to-reach population. Over time, this will maximize the impact of the individual agencies contributing to the Alliance and create a better understanding of the people being served so that future work is tailored to their needs.

This funding could either support one point person within the CEAS/CoC who can collaborate with the Street Outreach Committee and Consumer Justice Committee while planning these outreach events. Alternatively, the funding can be distributed to a handful of point persons at the lead service organizations that participated in and coordinated these events. At a state and county level, when Requests for Proposals are issued, there could be a budget line allocating funds for this access point person's work to plan the events and document data collected to inform future collaborations. While every service provider in Essex County is responsible for case management and organized reporting, the cross-collaboration that was created can only be sustained by continued investment in the coordinating work that drove this pilot project's success.

Endnotes

1. CCPH Board of Directors. Position Statement on Authentic Partnerships. Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2013.
2. The red pin drops represent the locations of outreach events, and the purple pin drops represent the locations of Newark partners that offered space for the two virtual court hubs. Hosts for events and court hubs included 224 HELP Center, Newark Hope Village, Restoration Center, Inc, Newark Emergency Services for Families, and the Newark Public Library. Organizers included representatives from Newark Community Solutions, Project Live, the City of Newark's Department of Health, Bridges Outreach, Inc, and Theresa Pringle of Pringle's Pit Stop.
3. The HELP Center, Newark Hope Village, and the Restoration Center are shelters and housing programs in Newark. Newark Penn Station is one of New Jersey's major transit hubs. Military Park and Chadwick & Hawthorne are two park spaces in Newark's central and south wards.

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