

More than 750 Homeless People with Mental Disorders in Permanent Housing Thanks to Innovative Partner Program with LASC

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“The Court finds that you are both eligible and suitable for participation in the Office of Diversion and Reentry probation program,” Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Karla Kerlin tells the defendant appearing before her in a downtown Los Angeles courtroom.

This defendant, along with more than 750 others, will now officially be part of the Los Angeles Superior Court and the Los Angeles County Office of Diversion and Reentry’s ODR Housing program. The program removes arrested persons with mental and/or substance use disorders from jails and provides permanent housing and services, once placed on probation, as long as they comply with the terms of the program.

“What we do know about this population is that if they are left untreated and unhoused, they have a higher recidivism rate,” said Peter Espinoza, director of the Office of Diversion and Reentry and former LASC supervising criminal judge. “They come in and out of the county jail at an alarmingly high rate.”

Aside from the person displaying signs of mental disorders and being homeless, there are no written guidelines to determine eligibility in the program other than a defendant and the charges against him or her have to be eligible for probation. Online referrals come in from attorneys and mental health professionals in the jails and can happen at any point throughout a defendant’s case, even after sentencing.

Once a referral is received, the clinical portion of the ODR team (see page 2) does a psychiatric assessment at the jail to determine if the defendant has some sort of mental disorder and would be willing to participate in the program. If the defendant passes the initial screening, Criminal Supervising Judge Scott Gordon will issue an order transferring the defendant to ODR Court for a hearing in his or her case.



Judge Karla Kerlin presides over the ODR Housing Calendar at LASC.

Defendants are reassessed on the day of the hearing by the clinical team to make sure there are no changes to mental health or willingness to participate since the initial assessment. The attorneys and judge confer over each case to determine if the defendant is suitable for the program and the case is eligible for probation.

“I will then sentence the defendant to ODR probation – or felony super charged probation, as I like to call it,” said Kerlin. “It’s all of the terms for a standard felony plus extra terms and conditions. Some also have suspended prison terms as part of their sentencing. The person is ordered conditionally released to a representative of the ODR program to be placed in housing.”

“Public safety is the number one priority when handing down sentences,” said Gordon. “This program allows us to look at each offender individually to see if they would benefit from it. By providing stable housing and guidelines for the defendant to follow, the likelihood of the individual reoffending decreases, making the community safer and benefitting the offender as well.”

The initial psychiatric assessments in the jails are also used to determine the type of housing the defendant will be sent to. There are different levels of housing, from board and care to independent living. Persons can progress through the housing while in the program and the housing and services are permanent, even after probation is completed.

After funding for housing was approved by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in late 2015, Gordon, Espinoza, and retired and former criminal supervising Judge James R. Brandlin worked together to brainstorm how the program would work. Since its 2016 launch, the program has expanded from one part-time courtroom to now having a full-time, designated courtroom in downtown Los Angeles and a part-time courtroom in Compton, with no additional funding provided to the Court.

“We are in the process of scaling up our clinical team in order to evaluate more people in jail. Once we are able to do that, more courtrooms will be needed to hear these cases,” said Espinoza, “We want to have a presence in more facilities and judicial districts throughout Los Angeles County. Also, we continue to reach out to community-based providers to increase our ability to house people.”

The program currently has an 80 percent retention rate.

“I always tell the people appearing before me who are entering into the program, ‘If you are struggling with any portion of this program, please come talk to me before deciding to leave,’” said Kerlin. “We will work to find a solution that allows them to stay in the program and continue serving their probation.”

Defendants are ordered to appear for progress reports after sentencing. Initially, they are seen frequently, roughly every four to six weeks, but if they are doing well in the program, the time in between visits will increase.

“I tell participants to think of it as your job, being an ODR participant, and work on you,” said Kerlin. “You have to go to your individual counseling, group sessions, your substance abuse programs. You have to do all of these things because this is your job as

part of this program.”

Even though the program is in its infancy, participants are doing well and have provided great feedback to the Court.

“It’s been an amazing process to see the transformation of the people appearing in ODR Court. Some are going to trade school; some have started working full-time jobs. I had a defendant thank me profusely in court for this program. She said it was incredibly dangerous living on the streets and ODR saved her,” said Kerlin.

The program is not only impactful on the participants, but also the judges presiding over them.

“It is so awesome to be a part of the teams convened to help people find solutions for their lives that will impact them personally and our community locally and nationally,” said Judge Karen Ackerson Gauff, who presides over the ODR Court in Compton. “I’m not sure words alone can explain the value I’ve seen gained by the defendants who have transformed since the beginning. It’s something that sticks with you.”

ODR Team

Courtroom - Judges Kerlin and Ackerson Gauff, defense attorneys, the Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office, Los Angeles County Public Defender, County of Los Angeles Alternate Public Defender, and the Los Angeles County Probation Department; Clinical team – Dr. Kristen Ochoa (medical director and forensic psychiatrist), two clinical social workers, and an administrator; and the housing partners.

