



**NEIGHBORHOOD  
OPPORTUNITY NETWORK**

**TRANSFORMING  
PROBATION**

by Susan Tucker

**E**arly in the spring of 2010, under the leadership of newly-appointed Commissioner Vincent N. Schiraldi, the New York City (NYC) Department of Probation (DOP) began a series of major reforms to transform the business of probation. Informed by an emerging body of theory and research about what works, the aim was to establish a community-oriented practice rooted in strength-and desistance-based theories of change (Maruna, 2001) and principles of justice and equality that would yield successful results for probation clients and their communities. As codified in 2011 and reaffirmed in 2012, the NYC Model of Probation (NYC Model) (DOP, 2012):

*...advances public safety and improves communities by adopting a [two-part] Justice Reinvestment framework...[that] focuses resources on individuals who pose the highest risk to public safety and reinvests in the communities where people on probation live.*

The NYC Model of Probation affirmatively adopts a Justice Reinvestment model, and the Neighborhood Opportunity Network (NeON) is its signature initiative, giving new meaning to community corrections.

## **JUSTICE REINVESTMENT**

Over the past decade, Justice Reinvestment has emerged as a leading national criminal justice system reform and public safety initiative (Justice Center, Bureau of Justice Assistance 2013). It was conceived as a strategy to repair and rebuild the human resources and physical infrastructure (e.g., jobs, schools, healthcare, parks and public spaces) of neighborhoods blighted by decades of criminal justice policies. Because of these policies, the U.S. prison and jail population exploded to 2.2 million



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(a 336 percent increase since 1980) and the probation and parole rolls have reached over 4.8 million as of the end of 2011. We now know that these increasingly punitive policies, which disproportionately affect minorities and their communities, can become independent variables contributing to the disruption of family and community that, in turn, exacerbate the cycle of crime and punishment (Clear, 2009).


To address this, Justice Reinvestment was designed as a vehicle to downsize correctional populations and the billion-dollar budgets spent to incarcerate or watch them and redirect public resources to neighborhoods where criminal justice is often the dominant government presence. Justice Reinvestment has become an important reform strategy not only across the U.S., but also in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, all countries where racial and ethnic minorities are seriously over-represented in their criminal justice systems.

In the U.S., a Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI) has been led by state officials and managed by the national Council of State Government's Justice Center, with funding from national foundations and DOJ's Bureau of Justice Assistance. JRI has operated in 27 states; about 18 have enacted JRI legislation for the purpose of stabilizing corrections populations and budgets, and state legislators and public officials have been educated about the perils of too much punishment, softening the ground for criminal justice systems reform. However, over time, local players from affected communities have been minimally involved in the planning and implementation of JRI, if at all, and any actual or projected savings have flowed to community corrections agencies, not invested in community institutions and infrastructure (Austin 2013).

## **THE NYC MODEL OF PROBATION**

DOP may be the first probation department in the country to spearhead a local, bottom-up Justice Reinvestment project in a major U.S. city.

The ultimate goal of the NYC Model is to expand probation clients' access to the kinds of opportunities—principally, education, employment and civic engagement—that can help them achieve their personal and professional goals and stay out of trouble – and thereby further insure public safety. In practice, it is less about “fixing” individuals than transforming the way DOP operates. Accordingly, policies and practices have been put in place that motivate staff to help clients succeed, keep them safely in the community and, whenever possible, avoid decisions that lead to revocation and incarceration.



Historically, Probation Officers (POs) occupy the dual roles of social worker and peace officer. These roles inevitably conflict and, over the past 40 years, some probation administrations and POs have tended to lean more toward the “tough on crime” approach. In sharp contrast, Commissioner Schiraldi’s mantra has been: “Do no harm. Do more good. Do it in the community.”

These three edicts encapsulate the NYC Model’s vision and mission, with various agency divisions focusing on different aspects of the strategy. NeON is the initiative that is most responsible for expanding opportunities, resources and services for clients (Goal 2), and forming strong partnerships and promoting community engagement by “doing it in the community” (Goal 4).

To achieve this vision, the NYC Model sets out five goals, each with a number of related *strategies*:

### **GOAL 1: SAFER COMMUNITIES**

- Strategy 1 - Target Resources to People on Probation at High-Risk of Reoffending
- Strategy 2 - Create and Rapidly Administer a Continuum of Graduated Responses

### **GOAL 2: OPPORTUNITIES, RESOURCES AND SERVICES**

- Strategy 3 - Establish the Neighborhood Opportunity Network
- Strategy 4 - Prioritize Education, Work and Strength-Based Development
- Strategy 5 - Realign Juvenile Justice Services
- Strategy 6 - Broker Opportunities and Eliminate Barriers to Success

### **GOAL 3: ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE**

- Strategy 7 - Strengthen Professional Development
- Strategy 8 - Adopt Best Practices
- Strategy 9 - Embrace Organizational Culture of Client Success

### **GOAL 4: STRONG PARTNERSHIPS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

- Strategy 10 - Establish Partnerships with Communities
- Strategy 11 - Collaborate with City, State and National Partners
- Strategy 12 - Build Broad Support for DOP Priorities

### **GOAL 5: MEASURING SUCCESS**

- Strategy 13 - Streamline Data Collection and Improve Analysis Capacity
- Strategy 14 - Promote Accountability



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## NEON: GIVING NEW MEANING TO COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS

There has been an increasing call for community involvement in corrections. Today, government and foundation requests for proposals and grant guidelines often require an intention to engage community leaders and residents as active participants. The National Institute of Corrections lists “engagement with the community,” as one of seven essential ingredients for successful reentry initiatives. Yet, there are few examples of genuine community engagement by criminal justice agencies, including the state-led JRI.

The NYC Model of Probation prioritizes the NeON as a community corrections innovation with community engagement as its core feature. Indeed, the NeON model gives positive meaning to the concept of “community corrections” at a time when the community corrections field is too often defined by what it is not: in other words, “not prison” or “not jail.” Instead of leading with the omnipresent threat of revocation and incarceration, the focus of the NeON is maximizing opportunity and client success by proactively and purposely changing where, how and with whom the business of probation is conducted.

## CREATING THE NEON

Not unlike the NYC Model of Probation overall, the process of creating the NeON has been an agency-wide—actually, *citywide*—effort. The NeON was conceived by DOP’s Director of Justice Reinvestment Initiatives and designed with the Citywide NeON Director. It has been implemented by Adult and Juvenile Operations under the leadership of their respective Deputy and Associate Commissioners, in accordance with NeON plans developed by each borough’s Assistant Commissioner. But every DOP senior manager together with his or her staff has played an essential role.

After the idea behind NeON was hatched, the task of implementation planning was handed over to a NeON Development Team (NDT). The team was chaired by the Director of Justice Reinvestment and met regularly throughout 2011 to provide guidance and troubleshoot. The following DOP staff members made crucial contributions to the effort:

- Chief of Staff: Involved in all aspects of the NeONs, especially procurement and liaising with City Hall.
- Deputy Commissioner for Administration: Led efforts to locate/secure sites and reallocate funds.

- Deputy Commissioner for Planning, Training and Community Partnerships and the Assistant Commissioner for Training: Provided staff with special trainings and helped collaborate with partner programs.
- Office of the General Counsel: Dealt with all legal issues, including negotiations with the agency's unions.
- Director of Public/Private Initiatives: Worked to secure philanthropic funding.
- Director of Communications: Communicated NeON concept internally and externally.
- Director for Legislative Affairs: Responsible for gaining the support of elected officials in NeON communities.
- Director of Research: Developed logic models and identified neighborhoods with highest concentration of residents on probation.

The support of City Hall and the input and cooperation of other City, state and federal agencies, has been crucial throughout. Outside professionals, including architects and academic researchers and even private corporations and funders, have also made important contributions. Finally, without the unwavering leadership and

encouragement of DOP Commissioner Vincent N. Schiraldi and the wholehearted commitment of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services Linda Gibbs to leveling the playing field for Black and Latino young men, this ambitious undertaking could never have been realized.

### **HOW DOES THE NEON "DO IT IN THE COMMUNITY"?**

The NYC Model of Probation represents a citywide DOP systems-change project. So what does it mean for probation services to be in the community? During the NeON's initial start-up phase, four fundamental strategies were emphasized: decentralization of probation services; joining key local networks including educators, healthcare and other service providers; working with clients and their families in the community; and purposefully engaging with the broader NeON community.

### **DECENTRALIZATION OF PROBATION SERVICES**

First, being in the community means being in client neighborhoods. Instead of working in downtown court buildings, key DOP personnel—Branch Chiefs, Supervising POs and POs, and other staff—work in local NeON offices that are co-located with or near non-profit organizations close to where clients live.

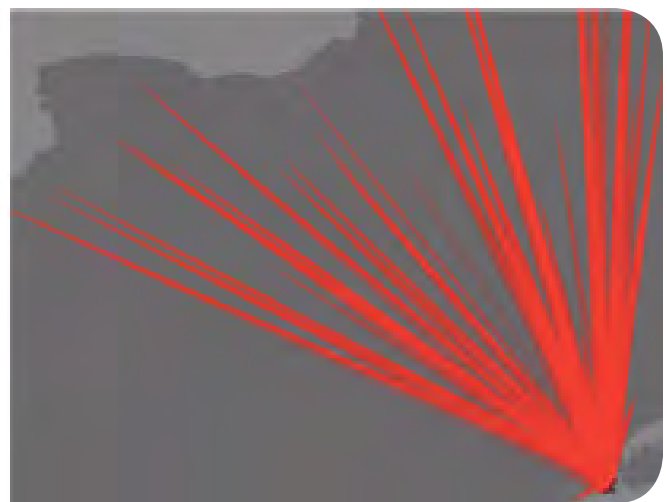
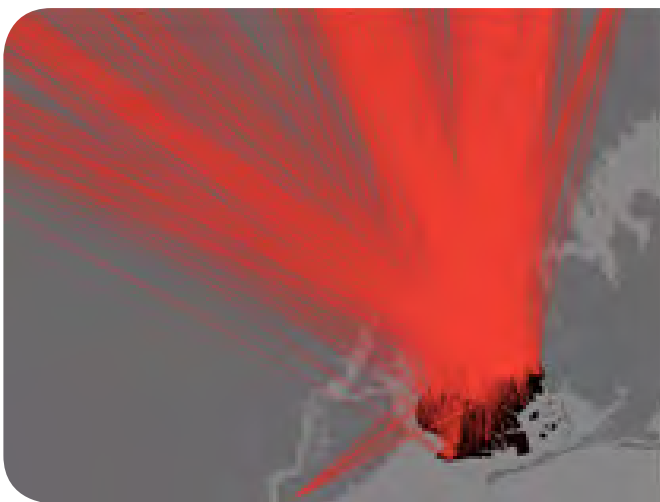


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The siting of NeONs and NeON Satellite offices takes into consideration several different factors: neighborhoods with a high density of residents serving terms of probation; community assets, such as effective local networks of service providers and institutions; community and political receptivity to the NeON; opposition to the NeON; community deficits such as a paucity of healthcare, educational and other services; high rates of unemployment and homelessness; and, of course, the cost of real estate.

Justice Mapping, an important Justice Reinvestment tool developed by the Justice Mapping Center (Cadora), now at Rutgers University School of Criminal Justice, and visualized by the Spatial Information Design Lab (SIDL) at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning (Kurgan), was used to identify those

places in NYC where concentrations of people on probation live. Justice Mapping pinpoints neighborhoods and blocks and sometimes even individual buildings where the millions of dollars that are spent to incarcerate and supervise residents dwarf the level of investment in local civil society institutions. A “million dollar block” (Gonnerman) was estimated to cost taxpayers one to six million dollars a year just for room and board in prison for residents of one single city street. Justice Mapping has become important because it pointedly (and elegantly) raises fundamental questions about governance priorities; for example, is spending \$6 million a year to incarcerate residents from a single block really the smartest way to make communities safe and viable?

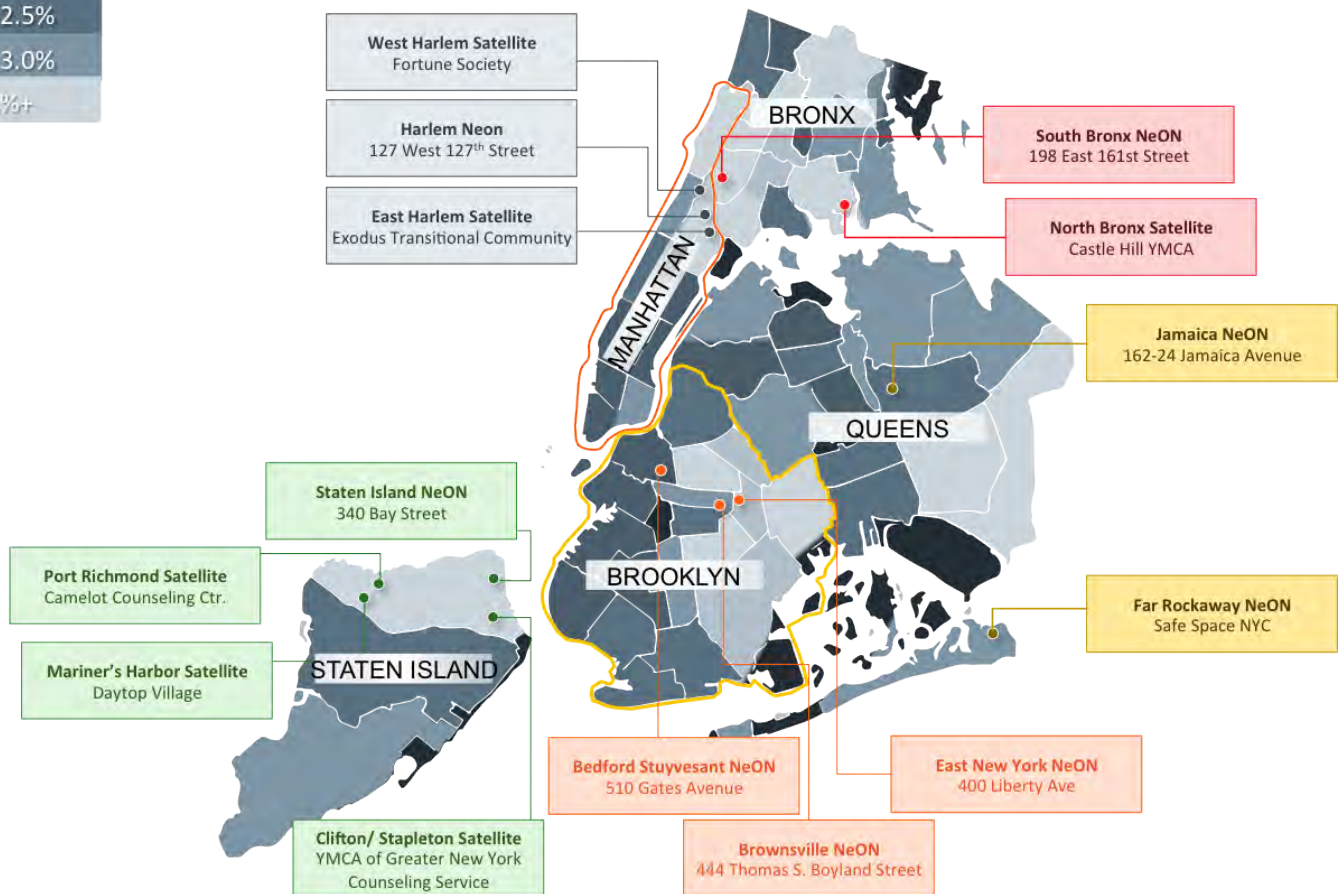


Kurgan 2010

Brooklyn is a good example; each line on the map represents a single resident of Brooklyn incarcerated in an upstate prison, who in 2003 cost the state \$40,000 a year for room and board. (Juveniles sentenced to “secure facilities” in New York State cost closer to \$260,000 a year.) As this map illustrates, Brooklyn has a high concentration of incarcerated residents (NB: NYC’s incarceration rate has dropped by 32 percent since Mayor Bloomberg took office in 2002, so while incarceration is still concentrated in a handful of NYC’s neighborhoods, there would be far fewer lines on this map were it drawn today). When DOP mapped where our clients live, we found that the Brownsville, East New York and Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhoods of Brooklyn, are also home to large concentrations of people on probation. Yet, DOP’s Brooklyn offices are far away in downtown Brooklyn.

**Percentage of Total Population on Probation**

Less Than 1.0%
1.1 - 2.0%
2.1 - 2.5%
2.6 - 3.0%
3.1%+





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This realization played a key role in the thinking behind our launch of the first NeON in Brownsville in December 2011 (and subsequently in East New York and Bedford Stuyvesant), but it wasn't the only factor. Despite improvements in public safety there, Brownsville remains one of NYC's most violent and under-resourced communities, with the country's most dense concentration of public housing and intense turf battles, especially among teens and young adults. We

located the Brownsville NeON in a multi-service center owned by the City that also houses a number of strong non-profits. Chief among them is the Brownsville Partnership, a network of local organizations sponsored by Community Solutions, which is an award winning organization with a creative and multi-faceted approach to strengthening communities and preventing homelessness.




Probation client Sean Turner speaks at the Brownsville NeON opening, while Mayor Bloomberg, Commissioner Schiraldi and Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz look on.

Additionally, a number of DOP staff wanted to work at the Brownsville NeON because they lived in the area, had worked there before and/or wanted to

try to make a difference in the neighborhood. This voluntary "buy-in" was not an insignificant factor since a citywide hiring freeze meant NeON staff had to be recruited exclusively from within the agency and many long-term POs were wary of moving from familiar positions to join a new administration's new, untested initiative.

With the addition of another five community-based NeONs since early 2012 — in East New York (Brooklyn), Central Harlem (Manhattan), South Jamaica (Queens), Staten Island and the South Bronx, and the Bedford-Stuyvesant (Brooklyn) NeON scheduled to open before the end of 2013 — there will be seven NeONs and another seven NeON Satellites. Satellites are co-located with local non-profits in neighborhoods with a significant number of clients --



in East and West Harlem (Manhattan); Castle Hill (North Bronx); Far Rockaway (Queens); and three in Northern Staten Island.

Each NeON and NeON Satellite is led by a Branch Chief or Supervising PO who reports to an Assistant Commissioner, each of whom directs borough operations. By the end of 2013, 60 percent of adult clients (medium and high-risk clients on DOP's "Development Track") will be served at one of seven NeON sites or seven NeON Satellites. The Harlem NeON also supervises every juvenile client who lives in that neighborhood. As the process of "NeONizing" the agency continues, it is expected that an even greater percentage of the Client Development Track will become NeON clients.

### **JOINING LOCAL NETWORKS**

The second aspect of "doing it in the community" involves NeON leadership and staff making concerted and intentional efforts to join local networks of educators, businesses, healthcare and service providers, arts organizations and tenants associations. In this way, staff members become more familiar with community assets, needs and activities and are better able to link clients to education, work and community opportunities. At the same time, staff presence and active participation as members of the network increases

community understanding of and engagement with probation. A number of local network organizations are based nearby or have co-located at the NeONs, stationing staff there several times a week and thereby enabling POs to facilitate introductions to outside organizations, whose representatives also meet clients directly, avoiding the all-too-common "missed connections" that are typical of paper or telephone referrals.

### **WORKING WITH CLIENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES IN THE COMMUNITY**

Third, NeON staff and partner organizations are working with clients and their families in neighborhood settings, both at the NeON itself and also at other local venues. No longer are client encounters with their POs restricted to hurried office appointments and unannounced home visits. Before the NeON, clients' family members were prohibited from accompanying them to appointments. Now, the clients' network of family and friends are also welcomed and become increasingly involved with their family member and the PO in developing Individual Achievement Plans (IAPs). NeON staff members are joining clients in a poetry writing workshop and weekly poetry slams. They have organized events to provide clients with prom dresses, participate in off-site job fairs and work alongside clients on community benefit projects.



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## PURPOSEFULLY ENGAGING WITH THE BROADER NEON COMMUNITY

Fourth, NeON leadership and staff are actively and intentionally engaging with the broader community, regularly attending and participating in meetings of local Community Boards, tenant and education associations and inviting community residents to NeON-sponsored job and health fairs and cultural events. This kind of participation makes probation more visible and transparent, builds community understanding and trust, and normalizes both probation operations and clients; breaking down the kind of us/them mentality that often impedes client success during and after probation.

The NeON's welcoming, open door policy and culture has attracted some high-profile poets, artists and arts education organizations, including Carnegie Hall, the Animation Project, Groundswell Community Mural Project, and others to conduct

workshops for clients and stage events at local NeONs. This includes, most concretely, NeON Stakeholder Groups, which consist of local leaders and residents, non-profit organizations, probation staff and former clients and family members. The Groups help coordinate NeON activities, provide input on probation policies and practices, and represent their community.




Before: Wooden benches in waiting room.

## DESIGNING THE NEON

As the agency began to operationalize the NYC

Model, it quickly became apparent that something had to be done to dramatically reengineer probation offices, especially the waiting rooms. The way they looked, felt and functioned was sending a message that was antithetical to the NeON and DOP's new approach. Like many other public sector spaces, particularly those in criminal



justice and social service agencies that cater primarily to the poor, DOP's waiting rooms tended to be negative, uninviting spaces. Too often they communicated (intentionally or not) downbeat, demoralizing messages that may have contributed to making interactions between clients and probation personnel argumentative and impolite. Waiting rooms were all about – “waiting” — and prohibitions about what not to do, rather than (say) inviting clients to join a workshop, take a class, research job opportunities or prepare a resume.

#### **WAITING ROOM IMPROVEMENT TEAM**

The Waiting Room Improvement Team (WRIT), a group of DOP staff and community members, was organized to rethink the design and culture of the waiting rooms to better reflect the NeON's mission and goals. Under the guidance of two outside experts, a Columbia University architecture professor and a Policy Analyst from the Mayor's Office of Operations, the team was led through a participatory and integrated design process. They examined the current state of affairs, looked at examples of other, more effective public spaces, and, together, envisioned a different kind of setting for their work with clients and the community.

The first big turning point came early on, when staff members were asked to talk about and describe the people with whom they work. At first, “probationers,” “my probationer” or “offenders” were

described only in terms of their conviction, length of sentence, time and place of arrest. When pressed, staff began to talk about their clients' age, family relationships, work, interests and desires. The demeaning and stigmatizing nature of the “probationer/offender” labels became readily apparent, as well as their effect on expectations—both the expectations of staff and the clients themselves. This was especially significant since the NYC Model is essentially about *high expectations*—both for the staff and also for those they supervise.

After much discussion and debate, the WRIT decided to recommend that in all written and oral communications “client” or “people on probation” would become the official, preferred terms of usage. Not surprisingly, this suggestion was initially met with some eye rolling. However, as time went on the shift in language became standard operating procedure and turned out to be a major breakthrough; it helped humanize the clients and change staff expectations and the character of their interactions with clients.

The WRIT's final report, issued in April 2012 (WRIT), included a recommendation for a “kit of parts” to transform waiting rooms into Resource Hubs that would reduce anxiety and hostility and promote positive, productive and more optimistic activities.



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## FROM WRIT TO RESOURCE HUB

Fortuitously, not long after the WRIT issued its report, DOP had a series of lucky breaks. The Columbia architect who had facilitated the WRIT discussed the project with the Commissioner of the NYC Department of Design and Construction, who provided an introduction to its SeeChangeNYC Chief Change Officer (whose job it is specifically to improve NYC government waiting spaces). She, in turn, brought in a top architect, whose team, including an award-winning graphic designer, agreed to work mostly *pro bono* to realize the transformation of DOP offices in record time. Fortunately, DOP's recently-

hired Deputy Commissioner of Administration had years of experience navigating the City's budgetary and procurement rules.




After: Art students refurbish wooden benches

None of the design team, except for the Columbia architect who had worked previously on Justice Mapping, had any knowledge or prior experience of the probation and criminal justice systems or the challenges of working with City government. They were provided with a quick debrief on mass incarceration and punishment in the U.S. and probation's role in the problem, and understood that DOP was determined -- through the NYC Model, NeON and Resource Hub -- to become part of the solution.

The design team then proceeded to work wonders. The Resource Hubs were quickly transformed to include attractive, movable furniture (in contrast to rows of

plastic chairs bolted to the floor); libraries with free books, magazines and journals; computers for job searches and resume writing; flat-screen TVs with



announcements, current events and human interest stories; signage and even a portable stage for poetry slams and concerts.

The grand opening of the Manhattan Adult Operations Resource Hub in November 2011 was attended by Deputy Mayor Gibbs, other City officials, partner organizations, DOP staff and clients and their families. As they exited the elevator, the clients could barely believe their eyes.

The design team continues to be involved with the NeONs, regularly attending events and even designing new spaces in the South Bronx, Brooklyn, Staten Island and Queens and they have become knowledgeable advocates for justice reform. The Resource Hub project also put probation on the map in the world of architects, designers, planners and change organizations. The project is being used as a case study to illustrate and examine the intersection of policy and design, and DOP staff have made presentations and participated in panel discussions at Town/Gown and Architectural League of New York events. Perhaps the most important feature of the WRIT's "kit of parts" was its personnel recommendations which, to an extent not originally anticipated, foreshadowed the eventual staffing structure of the NeONs. The WRIT recommended new functions such as Greeter, Resource Specialist, Resource Advisor, and Opportunity Broker in order to facilitate clients' access to opportunities and encourage them to take advantage of all the Resource Hub had to offer.



South Bronx probation client Tamara reads her poem at the "Free Verse" release party.



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Still a work in progress, probation staff members have taken on some of these new functions. Initial concerns that designer furniture would be vandalized have not materialized, suggesting, as the WRIT hoped, that clients have taken ownership of the space. Partner organizations have eagerly snapped up work spaces set aside for their use, and their representatives often stay at the NeON beyond the regular work day. The interaction between non-profit and NeON staff (especially at the NeON Satellites) has been a learning experience for both parties.


## “HOW DO YOU GET TO CARNEGIE HALL?”

One of the most remarkable parts of the NeON story has been the collaboration between DOP and Carnegie Hall. It is hard to imagine that Carnegie Hall would have become a prominent DOP partner without the NeON structure, culture and Resource Hub. Through Carnegie Hall’s Weill Music Institute, juvenile clients at the Harlem NeON have participated in music writing workshops and performed their compositions with professional musicians and singers at the Harlem NeON’s theater space. Later, they travelled to the South Bronx NeON to give a concert in a more intimate setting for NeON clients, staff and neighbors. In June 2013, they were invited to perform at Gracie Mansion at the Mayor’s two-year anniversary celebration of the NYC Young Men’s Initiative, which itself, as discussed below, provided significant investment in NeON communities.

**These kinds of activities have resulted in DOP’s winning, along with arts education organizations, several major arts grants.**

DOP has also organized a series of other arts education projects. The South Bronx NeON has a “poet-in-residence” who conducts a workshop several times a week that includes clients *and* staff and organizes weekly poetry slams that are open to the public. Participants’ poems were recently collected and published in *Free Verse*, a new journal organized by SeeChangeNYC’s Chief Change Officer.

Additional initiatives include the Animation Project, which uses behavior modification techniques to teach animation; on-site GED classes for clients and other neighborhood residents; and the Groundswell Mural Project,



which has connected Brownsville NeON clients with professional artists to research, plan, and paint several large-scale outdoor murals.

These kinds of activities have resulted in DOP's winning, along with arts education organizations, several major arts grants. In the spring of 2013, DOP and Groundswell were awarded one of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) *OurTown* grants for a project entitled "Transform/Restore: Brownsville." Brownsville NeON clients will produce five monumental billboard-sized murals in the Pitkin Avenue Business Improvement District demonstrating how the seemingly distinct priorities of art, business, and criminal justice can be aligned to support long-term community change. And Carnegie Hall has been awarded funding from the Open Society Foundation through the Mayor's Fund for the City of New York to create the *NeON Arts Education Consortium* with other citywide and local groups. NeON Stakeholder Groups will help identify and recruit local artists and arts education organizations to work with DOP clients on arts-related projects that will benefit the community. *NeON Arts* could well become an important and permanent part of the NYC Model.

Why do these arts education groups come to the NeON? Why are probation officers and clients participating,

voluntarily? It seems to have a lot to do with the fact that the NeON Resource Hub is an attractive, inviting, safe and stimulating space that is (comparatively) generously-resourced, and well-managed, with supportive staff and partner organizations that encourage client participation. NeON staff members have also demonstrated their willingness to be team players and share their authority. Arts education, in turn, is becoming a key NeON activity that engages and inspires people often considered difficult to engage who have little hope for the future; it teaches that hard work and perseverance produce results and introduces clients to strong role models to make a living doing what they love. And the arts are big business in New York.

The NeON/Resource Hub experience also demonstrates the important nexus between design and probation policy and practice, and has further implications for criminal justice policy generally. Commissioner Schiraldi's reform agenda set in motion an iterative process that produced new policies and practices, growing the agency, exponentially, through parallel or intersecting pathways, resulting in both planned and unexpected consequences. His commitment to a Justice Reinvestment framework and a community-oriented, asset-based approach, and his willingness to urge and support staff to design and implement this vision is what led to the agency's



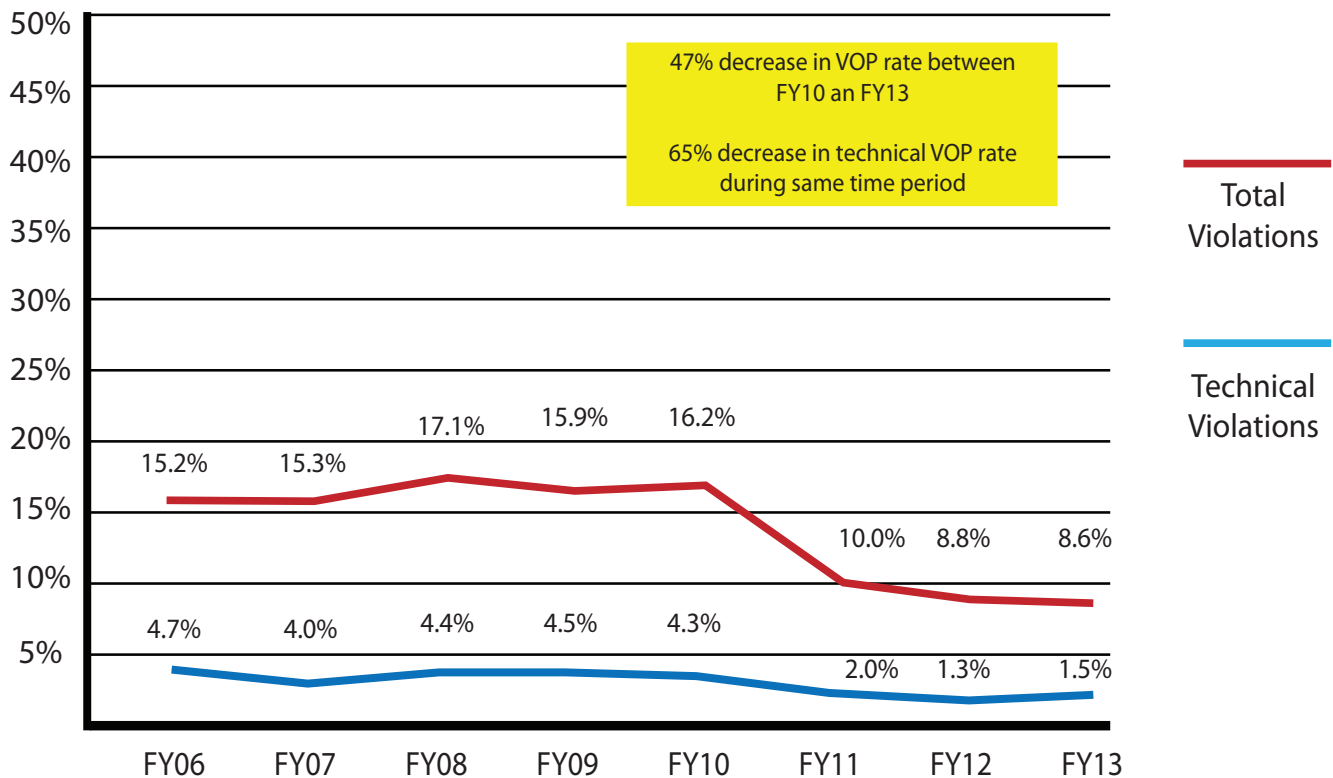


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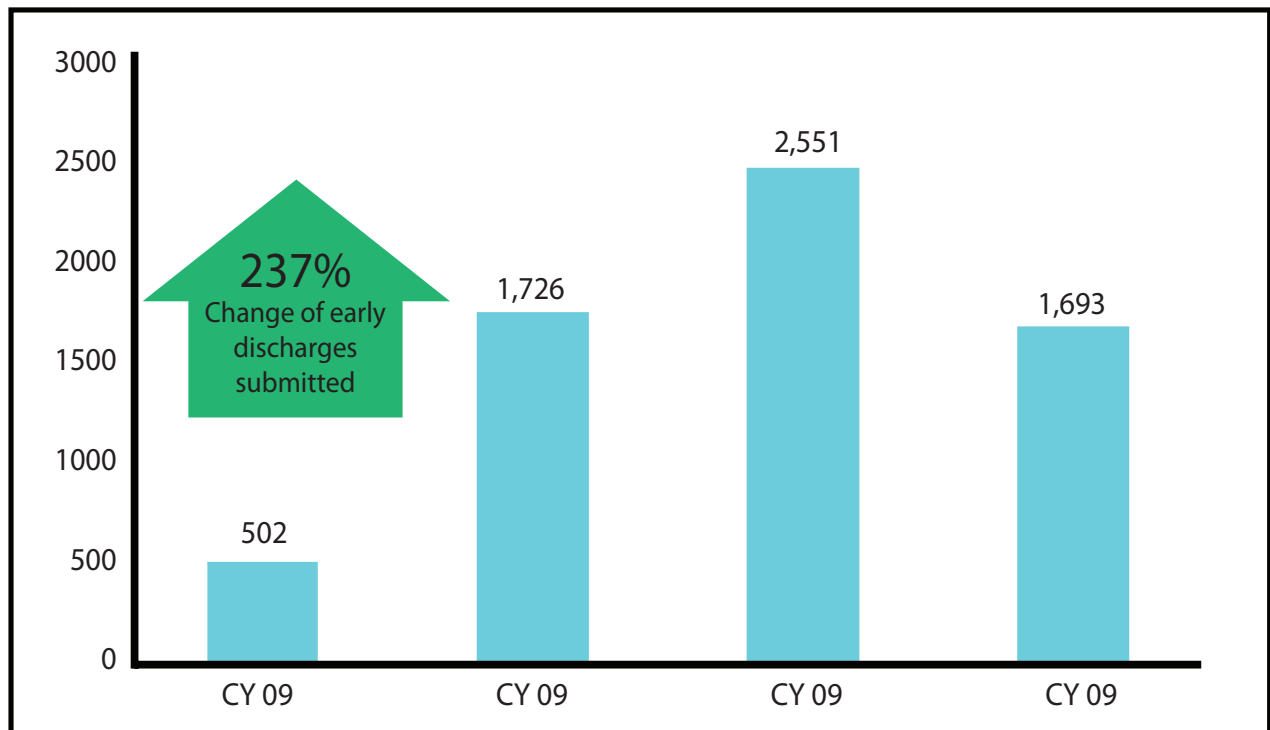
reorganization and decentralization, and adoption of the NYC Model of Probation with its “do no harm, do more good, do it in the community” mantra. In turn, this created a demand to rethink probation spaces, resulting in the Resource Hubs, which, because of the physical, cultural and professional environment they produced, made DOP more open to traditional service organizations and attracted an array of new partners, such as Carnegie Hall and other arts education groups.

Moreover, the agency’s collaboration with the design team and with arts education organizations and others has brought fresh skills and perspectives to the way DOP thinks and operates, demonstrating the value of trans-disciplinary approaches for innovating criminal justice policy and practice and broadening the concept of public safety.

Rate of Total and Technical VOPs Filed,  
FY06 to FY13



Number of Early Discharges Submitted  
2009-2013



Source: NYC DOP STARS Performance Management Statistics

**DO NO HARM**

## **HOW IS THE NYC MODEL OF PROBATION'S JUSTICE REINVESTMENT APPROACH DOING?**

Has the NYC Model resulted in fewer people being on probation, meaningful investment in client neighborhoods and additional monies being leveraged from other sources for NeON communities?

### **DOWNSIZING PROBATION POPULATIONS**

In addition to the NeON's "doing it in the community" strategy, DOP has put in place a number of specific policies and practices that affect all probation staff and clients, including those at the NeONs. These have been designed to improve outcomes and reduce the probation population by focusing resources on clients who most need and will benefit from supervision, by minimizing contact with those classified for a lower level of supervision, and by moving people off probation as soon as they are ready to



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manage their lives independently. These policies, collectively, can be described as follows:

*Doing no harm* by reducing violations by nearly half, increasing early discharges three-fold (see figures below), increasing Certificates of Relief from Disabilities, clearing out old warrants and helping clients correct their RAP sheets.


*Doing more good* by adopting policies informed by theory and evidence of best and promising practices; using validated risk assessment and Individual Achievement Plans to improve assessment and case management; instituting differentiated caseloads; expanding the continuum of programs; and ensuring staff have the necessary training to implement the NYC Model and stay informed about developments in the wider field. One specific example of “doing more good” was NYC YouthWRAP (Weekend Restoration Assistance Program), which has provided 500 stipended jobs for nearly a year to clients ages 14-18 to help communities devastated by Superstorm Sandy.

While it is too soon to know to what extent the NeON or other reforms have contributed to these outcomes, there are good reasons to believe they have played a significant role. It is interesting to note that these outcomes are in sync with—and no doubt contribute to—NYC’s

remarkable decline in both crime and incarceration, which has resulted in New York being one of only three other states to experience significant drops in both crime *and* incarceration (Greene and Mauer; Austin and Jacobson).

## LEVERAGING ADDITIONAL PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INVESTMENTS FOR NEON NEIGHBORHOODS

In addition to DOP’s own investments of staff and resources, artists, arts education organizations, arts funders, a range of service providers and educators have invested their staff, their time, and their resources in NeON communities. The single most significant investment, however, was made by the Young Men’s Initiative (YMI), Mayor Bloomberg’s comprehensive program to help black and Latino young men build stronger futures for themselves and their families. Due to the NeON’s visibility and innovative approach, the NeON became a centerpiece of YMI, and DOP was allotted \$36 million over three years in City tax levy and philanthropic dollars to invest in seven new programs, all of which are located in NeON neighborhoods. Local organizations and citywide non-profits, sometimes working in partnership, were awarded three-year contracts to provide educational, mentoring and work preparation/community benefit programming to NeON clients and other residents in NeON communities.



As of July 31, 2011 thirty-seven organizations have engaged 1,592 teens and young adults in Justice Scholars (a literacy program); Justice Community (a program providing stipended work on community benefit projects); Community Education Pathways to Success (a literacy and life-long learning program); and Arches Transformative Mentoring (a group mentoring program). (DOP's three other YMI programs focus on young people tried in Family Court.) In addition to providing valuable services to NeON clients, the YMI contracts also allowed DOP to strengthen the capacity of local organizations and provide tangible benefits to NeON neighborhoods, thereby helping sustain the NeON and its goals.

### **SYSTEMS CHANGE/CULTURE CHANGE**

It is important to remember that the NYC Model is a systems change initiative, and systems change is only possible with wide buy-in. Each local NeON, with its community partners, has been free to adopt strategies and design programs that reflect local culture and take advantage of community assets. While a great deal of thinking and planning preceded their implementation, the NeONs and NeON Satellites are not "planned communities." Much was deliberately left undetermined, as middle managers correctly advised. Instead of uniform, cookie-cutter solutions, the NeON model provides for testing change by planning it, trying it, observing the results, and acting on what is learned: a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle.

NeON staff members and stakeholders have created a number of initiatives that illustrate their inculcation of NeON principles. For example, a supervising PO and a PO at the South Bronx NeON have started LIFT (Ladies in Flight Together), a women's support group. The East New York NeON partnered with local organizations, the Center for Community Alternatives' Justice Community Program, and Good Shepherd Services to hold the first annual Family and

**Anecdotal evidence suggests that the atmosphere at the NeONs is much improved; staff members report that some clients seem less angry and more open to supervision.**



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Youth Day; 16 organizations participated and approximately 300 people attended. In September 2013, staff and clients from the Brownsville NeON joined the Residents Association of Van Dyke Houses, whose president is a member of the Brownsville NeON Stakeholder Group, for a day-long effort to clean up their community center. In Staten Island, enthusiastic and determined staff got tired of waiting to be “NeONized” and decided to take on the project themselves, including redesigning their waiting room. Before finalizing the color scheme they polled their clients, which resulted in what everyone now fondly refers to as the “lavender lounge.” Harlem NeON staff members enlisted more than a dozen neighborhood organizations in their efforts to open a Community Computer Center. And the volunteer Greeter at the South Bronx NeON is a client’s mother.


Anecdotal evidence suggests that the atmosphere at the NeONs is much improved; staff members report that some clients seem less angry and more open to supervision. The computer stations in the Resource Hubs are usually occupied and people, on the whole, are seeing their POs more quickly, especially at the smaller NeONs like Brownsville. Connections are being made with outside service providers. People are writing poetry, composing music, learning to read and write and make animation. It’s still a work in progress, but DOP’s efforts to change the

mood and tone and provide productive and sometimes entertaining spaces are noticeable.

We also expect that the NeON, and the NeON Stakeholder Groups, will enhance DOP’s legitimacy among community residents and organizations. Some think there is too much policing and punishment, others think there is too little. Whatever their perspective, with so many local people on probation or parole or incarcerated, crime and punishment are a constant reality that affects everyday life.

Because of America’s peculiar history of structural racism and increasingly intense economic and class disparities, geography turns out to pose a particularly acute challenge for the NeON. It is not by accident that probation clients – like criminal justice populations across the U.S. – tend to come from segregated enclaves of poor people and people of color.

The collective and common experience of disproportionate crime and punishment in “million dollar” neighborhoods has created a legitimacy problem for probation, not unlike other law enforcement agencies. Fear and distrust of the “system” often trumps fear of crime. Correctly or not, the law enforcement establishment can be seen as part of the problem, not part of the solution. The legitimacy issue is particularly acute for NeON efforts to join local networks,



become trusted partners, and marshal community support for clients.

Transforming a large city agency is never an easy task. Administrations, each with its own philosophy and character, come and go. Meanwhile, civil servants keep the services going. The NeONs and the NYC Model appear to be gaining acceptance both inside and outside the agency. It remains a work in progress but, by any standards, remarkable strides have been made in record time.

At the Brownsville and South Bronx NeON anniversary celebrations, proud and enthusiastic staff mingled with more satisfied clients and the broader community. Entire families made long journeys to attend their children's GED graduations. Concerts and poetry readings attracted local audiences who felt comfortable coming to their local NeON, even though they are not on probation. Brownsville NeON POs attended the funeral for a client's young son because he was their loss, too.

Researchers from John Jay College of Justice are conducting a qualitative study of the NeON. A newly hired director of Quality Assurance, working with the Director of Research, is developing NeON metrics. Client and staff satisfaction surveys will be conducted at regular intervals.

Gradually, as the evidence accumulates, it should become possible to answer some key questions. Are DOP's clients better educated, better employed, better parents? Are they more engaged with the community? Are they staying out of trouble and leading productive lives? Is DOP succeeding as a Justice Reinvestment model and becoming a part of the solution to the country's justice challenges? Do staff believe in the NYC Model and the NeON? Have their listening skills and ability to incentivize client success improved?

The process of "NeONizing" the department must continue until as many clients as possible become NeON clients and all DOP staff embrace wholeheartedly the NeON approach. The education and training provided to staff must emphasize NeON-specific goals and principles. The Resource Hubs must be staffed by dedicated, full-time Resource Specialists and Opportunity Brokers. Classes, workshops and community benefit projects must attract even more participants and more actively partner with the community. The NeON and DOP generally, must become a genuine learning community in which staff are encouraged and incentivized to be self-reflective, self-critical and self-correcting. Metrics should be developed and the NeON experiment studied, evaluated and discussed, internally, independently and from a number of perspectives and in



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various venues to capture lessons learned and opportunities for replication.

The NeON is a bold criminal and social justice policy innovation—a visible and concrete manifestation of the NYC Model of Probation that is grounded in Justice Reinvestment principles and goals. Jeremy Travis, President of the City University of New York’s John Jay College of Criminal Justice and former Director of the National Institute of Justice, has said that the Neighborhood Opportunity Network “could be a game-changer,” adding, “I’m not aware of anything like this existing anywhere else.” (Travis, 2013). Time will tell, but the early results are certainly promising. ▶▶▲

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