

THE COURT HEARING REMINDER PROJECT
"If you call them, they will come"

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Tricia L. Crozier
King County District Court

ABSTRACT

"The court system in Washington State needs help. We cannot continue to do business as usual." This diagnosis was made by Justice Richard Guy, Chief Justice of the Washington Supreme Court in his 2000 State of the Court Address. "Business as usual" for many courts has included acceptance of the fact that many people who are ordered to appear in court simply do not do so. Washington is no different than other parts of the country when it comes to failures to appear for court. Failures to appear mean more costs for jail services, court time, officer time and frustration that adds to the feeling that "the system doesn't work." In the Shoreline Division of King County District Court, an uncomplicated approach was taken on the failure to appear problem. A simple reminder call is made to the defendant by a community volunteer just before the scheduled appearance date to "jog their memory." This new method is not "business as usual." Rather, it is communities working together to achieve a goal to link citizen volunteers with citizens required to attend court hearings, thus breaking down barriers and finding innovative solutions to the problems in the criminal justice system.

The objective of the Court Hearing Reminder Project is to increase court appearance rates, issue fewer warrants for failure to appear and reduce the number of hearings necessary to bring a case to conclusion. It is hoped that the effects of this project will reduce jail costs, reduce the number of appearances on each case and increase responsibility of the defendants required to appear in court, all without costs to the jurisdiction.

This paper will examine the failure to appear rates before and after the Court Hearing Reminder Project began in order to determine if the goals of the project have been met. Additionally, the number of hearings held on each case will be considered.

This project is fulfilling its objectives in several ways. Despite an increase in caseload, failures to appear have been reduced. Another indication of success is the duplication of this pilot project in other jurisdictions. Those projects have also been successful in meeting the challenge to lower failure to appear rates. Finally, new technologies are being introduced to make the reminder calls electronically. The principal force behind this new automated effort is the ability to call a large

number of defendants each day therefore increasing substantially the number of people that can be reminded to appear in court.

Based on this examination, applying these concepts to reduce the failures to appear has worked. It appears that making the reminder calls prior to the scheduled court hearing reduces failures to appear. I encourage other courts across the nation to give it a try.

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Knowledge Information Services
National Center for State Courts
300 Newport Avenue
Williamsburg, VA 23185
Phone: (800) 616-6164

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