

# Community First

Community First engages community members in need who frequent the Times Square area and who come through Midtown Community Justice Center's court and diversion programming. These individuals may be experiencing homelessness and/or need mental health or harm reduction services, benefits connections, medical treatment, or other support. A team of Community Navigators act as peer mobile case managers to address the varied needs of people in our community using a client-centered lens.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant increase in the number of people who are housing insecure and living with severe mental health issues and/or substance use addictions gathering in and immediately around the Times Square area. While New York City is service-rich, the field often operates in silos, creating a disjointed system of care for the most vulnerable populations. Often, those who need support exist under the radar until a moment of crisis like an arrest or an emergency room visit forces a response.

Starting in January 2021, Midtown Community Justice Center (Justice Center), in partnership with the Times Square Alliance, Breaking Ground, and Fountain House, piloted Community First. As a pre-crisis intervention, Community First seeks to facilitate continuity of destigmatizing

and client-centered care for some of the city's most disconnected residents through mobile case management, street outreach, and assistance for court-involved and diversion participants.

## Peer Support

Community First's Community Navigators share lived experience with participants, offering peer support to help clients achieve participant-identified goals such as obtaining transitional and permanent housing, substance use treatment, mental and physical health care, identification, financial benefits, employment, and legal assistance. Their lived experiences overlap with that of many participants, including experiences with serious mental illness, substance use,

housing insecurity, and/or system involvement, allowing staff to deeply understand and value what clients are facing and build rapport and trust more quickly. Navigators are then able to serve as mentors, providing authentic hope and guidance to participants, and encouragement to continue engaging as they work towards their self-identified goals.

## Program Model

The Community First model differs from existing street outreach initiatives by focusing on building trusting relationships and meeting community members “where they’re at” before making linkages to meaningful and significant services provided by community-based organizations in the Justice Center’s network. The time spent building trusting relationships with community members in need results in those individuals confidently engaging in critical services with greater chances for long-term success.

The Community First team works closely with staff from the Times Square Alliance, Breaking Ground, and Fountain House to facilitate connections to services as they arise. The Community Navigators go into the community with food, clothing, hygiene materials, and harm reduction supplies to begin engaging individuals in conversations around their individual needs. The aim is to provide people with what they need immediately and then work towards linking them to longer-term support and housing. However, those community members have the option to define what support means to them. Additionally, mobile case managers work to provide community members with services that

may be difficult if not impossible for them to access, like bathroom facilities, general wellness support, haircuts, showers, laundry services, and workforce development and job opportunities.

## Working with Court and Diversion Clients

Beyond street outreach, it has become evident that participants in other programs at the Justice Center who flag for housing insecurity, immigration, substance use disorders, and other co-occurring challenges would benefit from community navigation and care coordination. Community First’s engagement with the Justice Center’s court-based programming has proven highly impactful for some of the city’s most at-risk people. The Manhattan Misdemeanor Mental Health Court sees clients with diagnoses of serious mental illness who often face significant barriers to daily functioning, including housing instability, and who can benefit from mobile service navigation. After completing court mandates, many participants who work with Community First choose to continue engaging voluntarily, a testament to the relationship-driven model. Anecdotal accounts of behavior change and feelings of increased hope, coupled with the successful outcomes listed above, underscore the value of Community First.

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### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Melissa Appleton

[mappleton@innovatingjustice.org](mailto:mappleton@innovatingjustice.org)

917.319.8960