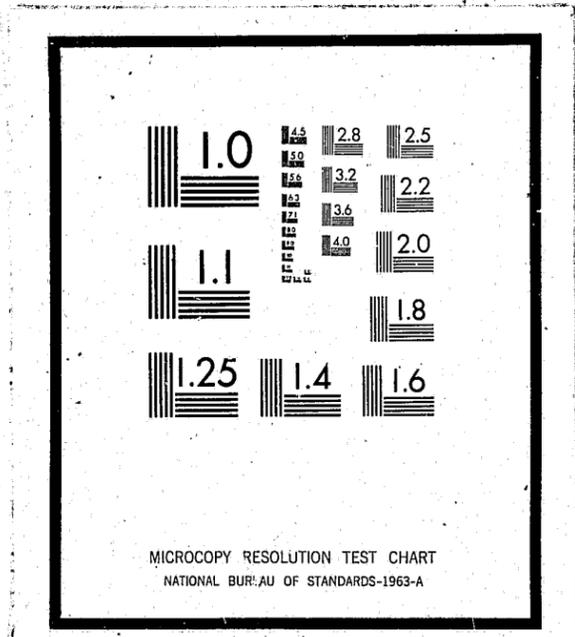


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Los Angeles County Municipal Courts Planning & Research

Project Description

014184

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PLANNING AND RESEARCH UNIT PROJECT DESCRIPTION

INTRODUCTION

A unique demonstration program is being sponsored by the Los Angeles County Municipal Courts. It has lawyers directing computer projects, judges working with community groups to establish detoxification centers, and major justice agencies working together to create a totally new criminal justice system coordinator.

The sign on the door introduces the Planning and Research Unit, an unprecedented multidisciplinary approach to justice problems. Six young men and women with experience in the fields of law, economics, public administration, business and journalism have committed their diverse talents toward improvement of the justice system.

The Planning and Research Unit is funded through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) and is designed to strengthen and improve the overall operations of the Municipal Courts of Los Angeles County.

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Through the Planning and Research Unit, the Municipal Courts have taken a new and more aggressive posture. They have come to the foreground as an innovative justice agency.

ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

The Los Angeles County Municipal Courts make up the nation's most massive lower court system; this complex includes 138 judges in 25 judicial districts, spanning 4069 square miles. Formerly, the courts were isolated from the activities of other justice agencies. Judges came to recognize the need for a group which could devote its full energies to the resolution of complex problems involving the courts. Since its inception, the Planning Unit has served to gather data, analyze problems, and recommend courses of action for consideration by the judges.

Originally funded with an \$86,000 LEAA grant, the Unit operated from August 1973 to January 1, 1974 with a Chief Planner and two Associates. On the basis of its initial accomplishments and greatly increased workload, the grant was increased to provide for three additional planners and 10 legal interns.

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Guidance on major Project undertakings and policy matters is provided through the officers of the Municipal Court Judges' Association. Many projects come directly from judges, and others have been identified by the California Council of Criminal Justice. Ideas are generated from within the Unit as well. Contact with other justice agencies occur regularly.

The small, well designed Unit has remained flexible and free from daily administrative problems which might hamper its effectiveness. It is well equipped to engage in both detailed research and long-range planning.

Although the Unit has no actual implementing authority, it does outline recommendations and oversee their accomplishment. A number of the Unit's projects are now in operation.

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PROJECT AREAS

The Planning and Research Unit is concerned with the improvement of judicial administration and efficiency and the coordination between the justice agencies of Los Angeles County. This activity divides into five areas:

1. Multi-Agency projects
2. Judicial Administration and Efficiency
3. Education and Research
4. Applications of Electronic Data Processing
5. Court Reorganization

1. Multi-Agency Projects:

The Planning Unit's focus extends beyond problems affecting only the Courts. The major system-wide effort has been a proposal for a Criminal Justice System Coordinator, presented to the major justice agencies of Los Angeles County and the State of California. This proposal relied upon the use of a multi-agency staff to coordinate research efforts among the member groups.

The concept and design for the Criminal Justice Coordinator was developed within the Planning Unit and called for an

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institutional recognition of the interrelationships among the major justice agencies. The initial steps of the proposal have been agreed upon; directors of the planning staff of each agency will be meeting together to develop the concept.

Another example of system-wide activity is the effort to establish detoxification centers for "revolving door" alcoholics. The current method of handling the public inebriate, processing him through the criminal justice system, has proven inadequate. Court costs and redivivism rates are high.

This project required extensive communication with numerous other agencies, including the County Commission on Alcoholism, County Task Force on Alcoholism, County Office of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, California State Office of Alcohol Program Management, and the California Council on Criminal Justice.

Staff inquiries focused on the costs of adjudication procedures, rehabilitation and treatment alternatives, and legal issues, such as the equal protection problems present in mandatory detoxification programs.

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The Planning and Research Unit recommended that Los Angeles County implement a voluntary detoxification program. The program will provide treatment, evaluation and referral services to the inebriate. Implementation of the program is to begin by June of 1974.

Although the courts had long been concerned with the problem of alcoholism, they had no staff capable of acquiring and evaluating the information necessary to design a detoxification program. The creation of the Planning and Research Unit made it possible for the courts to take an active role in developing alternative programs.

A related program concerns second-offense drunk drivers. California Vehicle Code §23102.3, effective January, 1974, requires pre-sentence investigations for these defendants. The courts had to determine who could best conduct these investigations, what information would be required, and the length of time to be allotted for each investigation. The courts were also interested in assessing the experience of ten California counties in which the requirement had taken effect a year earlier.

A portion of the work involved a detailed survey of the practices in these counties; again, the Planning and Research Unit was the only agency capable of performing the research for the courts.

The Planning and Research Unit organized extensive meetings between judges, probation officers, and numerous community groups concerned with alcohol abuse. The result was the production of an alcohol treatment questionnaire and court form now in use countywide.

One of the Unit's early efforts was to assist in facilitating creation of a traffic school for professional drivers. Enormous tie-ups in traffic court had resulted from professional drivers demanding jury trials for each citation rather than either suffering the occupational detriment involved in pleading guilty, or attending a traffic school session geared to nonprofessionals. The Planning Unit worked with the supervising judge of the traffic court, with the Teamsters Union, and with Federal authorities; it also performed a curriculum evaluation. The school has now been in successful operation for over nine months.

The application of the skills of the professionals gathered in the Planning and Research Unit to justice system problems represents the Los Angeles Municipal Court's recognition that units of the justice system can no longer benefit from strict adherence to practices which maintain their insularity.

2. Judicial Administration and Efficiency

A concern with effective administration of the courts is the source of many Planning Unit projects.

Currently underway is an effort to institute a system whereby certain traffic offenders would be permitted to mail in their bail in lieu of appearing in person at the courthouse. This project uses computers to calculate bail and print out a courtesy notice, which is then mailed to the alleged offender, quoting the appropriate bail and giving him the choice of submitting it by mail or appearing in person.

The Planning Unit is also making provision for a system whereby traffic offenders obtain a trial

date from the clerk, rather than from the court in a formal arraignment. This would eliminate one of two court appearances and result in a substantial saving of court time.

3. Education and Research

At times, judges request the answer to a specific problem affecting all municipal court judges. For example, an analysis of California's recently enacted Conflict-of-Interest Act (requiring disclosure of financial interests) was distributed to all municipal court judges. The memo digested all case law and legal opinions relevant to the new Act, and made recommendations to the judges on how to comply with the new law.

In response to widespread interest on the part of the Municipal court judges, the Planning and Research Unit now distributes a bi-monthly "Legislative Report". The Report lists and summarizes all state legislation which is of importance or interest

to the courts. All action taken on these bills is noted, so that judges can be kept up to date on the progress of bills which are of interest to them.

Judges have responded favorably to the Legislative Reports. Numerous requests for impact studies of proposed legislation have been generated by this periodical.

The Legislative Report has proven to be an invaluable tool for increasing the judges' awareness and increasing the court's ability to adapt to changes in the law.

4. Applications of Electronic Data Processing

Possible applications of electronic data processing to the courts are under thorough investigation. To achieve more effective and efficient administration of criminal justice, the Planning Unit initiated a plan to install video display terminals and high-speed printers in municipal courts throughout the County. The installation of such

computer equipment will allow the courts to have instantaneous access to a probation and criminal history index. No such information is presently available. Furthermore, only a few jurisdictions within the county keep in-house records of terms and conditions of current probation sentences. If such data were available to the courts, probation revocation would become a much more useful technique.

In addition, post-arraignment and post-conviction sentencing procedures would be greatly improved and trial court calendar congestion would be substantially relieved.

Long-range plans envision hook-up into a computer file in Sacramento containing similar information on misdemeanor offenders throughout the state.

5. Court Reorganization

Of broad impact has been the Planning Unit's involvement in the effort to consolidate the municipal and superior courts in California into a single-trial court system. California currently maintains a three-level trial court system, including municipal, justice and superior courts.

The Planning Unit produced and distributed statewide, a 60-page analysis of pending court consolidation legislation. These materials were relied upon heavily by members of legislative committees during numerous hearings in Sacramento. All of the consolidation bills introduced in the Legislature within the past two years were analyzed in terms of an 18-point checklist formulated by the Unit in order to facilitate a comparison of the bills' respective features.

The Planning Unit's analysis proved so useful that it was distributed to municipal and superior court judges throughout California.

In addition, Planning Unit staff conducted meetings with court-related agencies including the District Attorney, Public Defender, City Attorney, Probation Department, Sheriff's Department, Marshal's Office, and Clerks and Court Reporters, to solicit their input. Planning Unit staff were requested to appear in Sacramento repeatedly to testify as expert witnesses.

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THE FUTURE

New projects are continuously undertaken. Preliminary research has been done involving centralized arraignment facilities for Los Angeles County, the use of O.R. releases, transfer of failure to appear matters from the courts to the Department of Motor Vehicles, examination of the purging of stale warrants, and the study of sentencing procedures and practices.

Current projects also include examination of the appointment of attorneys in conflict of interest cases, filings of alternative felony/misdemeanor offenses, and the standardization of forms and stamps used in all municipal courts in Los Angeles County.

The Municipal Courts of Los Angeles County have recognized the need for a group which would be active in the realm of criminal justice planning and coordination. The formation of the Planning and Research Unit reflects the belief that a court system can sponsor efforts to improve the justice system.

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As communities recognize the need for multi-agency approaches to problems, they might consider the utility of institutionalizing a staff committed to those efforts. The Planning and Research Unit of the Los Angeles Municipal Court, now entering its eleventh month of operation, will be happy to supply practical advice and examples of its work.

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