

## *IN THE CITIES: TUCSON REPORTS \$3.8 MILLION SAVINGS THROUGH USE OF HOMELESS COURT*



*TUCSON, ARIZONA.* "A life term on the installment plan" is how Tucson Magistrate Michael Lex characterized the ricocheting of homeless people through the Tucson jail over and over again. Magistrate Lex was reporting recently to the Tucson Planning Council on the success and savings evidenced by Tucson's Homeless Court created in 2000.

According to the Magistrate, who acts as an arraignment judge and trial judge, the city court's homeless program, which addresses misdemeanors with sentences of up to six months, has resulted in almost 32,000 charges dismissed since the program began in 2000. Those charges represent over 13,360 court dockets and nearly 6,000 individuals whose charges were dismissed after they completed an individual diversion program. Magistrate Lex estimates the savings to the system at \$3.8 million.

The city court's homeless program has reduced the number of jail days for this nonviolent population by over 89,560 since 2000, Lex said. "It is cheaper to do it this way," he noted. Lex said some of these individuals "may have had 100 or more arrests on similar charges" before they were diverted to the homeless court program.

The innovation of special courts was the focus on one episode of the Council's [20 in 20](#) series in June 2008. All sectors of the community benefit from the solution offered by the court. Unresolved legal issues can pose numerous barriers to applying for benefits and identification, seeking housing and employment, and more. Individuals benefit by resolving past issues with the court system and presenting their progress report from their agency sponsor regarding program participation and self-sufficiency. The judicial system benefits by providing a more accessible venue for individuals to use the courts, clearing old cases and creating greater efficiency by resolving multiple hearings for the same individuals, thus contributing to reduced demand in the court. Community based programs benefit by having consumers with fewer barriers to a positive path and stability, due to risk of incarceration or re-arrest. The community at large benefits from having individuals working to resolve judicial issues while engaging needed resources for housing, employment, treatment, and more.

The Tucson/Pima County Plan was completed in 2006 and unveiled in a public event where Mayor Walkup welcomed United States Interagency Council on Homelessness Executive Director Philip Mangano (pictured here). The Plan endorses a strategy of rapid rehousing that strives to quickly place homeless individuals and families in permanent housing with wraparound services determined by "the needs and desires of the homeless household." The Plan includes a special focus on housing for the elderly, recommending the creation of 50 new affordable housing units a year for

seniors. Other recommendations include creating additional respite care beds, increasing detoxification capacity, improving access to transit services to include identifying a dedicated source of funding for bus passes, and creating incentives for mergers and other levels of coordination among service agencies that reduce administrative costs and increase money for direct services. The Pima/Tucson Plan was coordinated with the State of Arizona 10 Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness.

USICH *e-news* 10/2/08