



Lake County, Ohio



Lake County Board of Commissioners

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PRESS RELEASE

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Criminal Justice Community Engagement and Outreach Program Announced

Lake County Commissioners today approved funding for a new Criminal Justice Community Engagement and Outreach Program administered through the Lake County Public Defender's office. Funding for the program comes due to the work of Lake County Clerk of Court Faith Andrews and her staff in generating excess title funds for the county's general fund.

The new program is designed to increase community involvement in the criminal justice system and assist individuals who have been in jail to return to their communities to live productive, crime-free lives. The genesis for this program was a collaborative effort between the late Bishop Roderick Coffee and Commissioner President John Hamercheck. Bishop Coffee, a well-known and respected senior pastor of the Union Community Church in Concord Township, was passionately committed to community involvement in the criminal justice system and was one of the original members of Begin the Conversation, a group of community leaders that formed almost seven years ago to address race relations and justice in Lake County. As part of his work with this group, Bishop Coffee raised the idea of the creation of a community-liaison type program that would benefit the local community.

"We are the first County in Ohio to offer such a program through our public defender's office," said Commissioner President John Hamercheck. "We believe this program will benefit not only the lives of those who are attempting to move beyond the criminal justice system but also will enhance the quality of life in all Lake County communities. It hopefully will contribute to lower repeat crime rates and increase family and financial stability and happiness within our communities."

The Program Coordinator will be hired from the local community and will assist public defenders in effectively representing their clients through his or her community connections and relationships. The coordinator will work under the direction of the public defenders in the pretrial preparation and resolution of criminal cases, as well as in post-conviction matters. The coordinator also will collaborate with local agencies and programs such as Lifeline's Reentry Coalition in making referrals to medical, educational, vocational, employment, church, housing and social services – all of which can assist individuals in leading crime-free lifestyles as contributing members of society. The coordinator also will assist in planning community outreach events and legal clinics that would address the Lake County criminal justice system in general, as well as legal issues that hamper employment such as the sealing of criminal records and driving privileges and licenses.

"First, I would like to thank my amazing team at our two Title Bureaus. Without their efforts we would not be able to provide seed funding for projects like this. As Clerk of Courts, I too often see individuals coming back into the criminal justice system. With this project, I am confident that we can drive down the recidivism rate and continue to supply much needed community support. I look forward to hearing about all of the success stories that will come out of this project in the years to come," said Clerk of Courts Faith Andrews.

"This program will improve our office's connection to the community," said Lake County Public Defender Vanessa Clapp. "Through it, we hope to be more involved with meeting the needs of our clients beyond the courtroom doors with the goal that most will never walk through those doors again. We also anticipate the new program will benefit the community at large, which may include our clients' friends and family, by encouraging community participation as needed to reach the best resolution for our clients and their future prospects," said Lake County Public Defender Vanessa Clapp.

“Lake County is committed to doing justice,” said Commissioner John Plecnik. “This new program will help to ensure a higher level of access to justice for those who lack social and familial networks of support. It will also open more doors to rehabilitation and healing for those who need a helping hand to move forward with their lives. As a law professor, I am so proud of our Lake County community for coming together to make this meaningful reform possible.”

“It is critically important that we give opportunity for success to those who have paid their debt to society. Recidivism is a plague that makes much of the criminal justice system to appear ineffective. Giving people opportunities to succeed is the American Way and I am proud to support this outreach program,” said Commissioner Ron Young.

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