

Vancouver Community Court Judge Elisabeth Burgess agrees service integration key to success in DTES

A recent study suggests 300 people in the Downtown Eastside cost \$26.5M in services

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Judge Elisabeth Burgess says Vancouver's Downtown Community Court is successful because it provides integrated services all in the same building. (CBC)

The new judge of [Vancouver's Downtown Community Court](#) agrees with a recently published Simon Fraser University study that integration is key to providing better services for people in the Downtown Eastside.

Last week, a study led by SFU health sciences researcher Dr. Julian Somers suggested 300 offenders frequently involved with the justice system cost \$26.5 million in services.

Elisabeth Burgess, who took over as the principal judge of the court in September, said until she read the study, she thought there could never be too many resources in the Downtown Eastside. Now, she's changed her tune.

"It's a very interesting report. [Somers] has years of experience working in this area. So maybe there can be resources that aren't being utilized as well as they need to be — that's what community court tries to do," she said.

The community court was the first of its kind when it opened its doors in 2008 to handle small-time, repeat offenders who often cope with mental illness and have problems with substance abuse.

Integration key to success

Burgess explained that when defendants first come to the court, they're given a needs assessment by one of 14 on-site service groups, which range from mental and physical health practitioners to probation officers who can help with housing and income assistance.

"As Julian Somers identified in his work that was published last week, the way to use resources more effectively is integration, and that's what we've had as our goal," she said.

For some, she said, it's the first time they've had access to those kinds of services.



Vancouver's downtown community court first opened its doors in 2008. (CBC)

"There are some people who are entitled to income assistance who don't actually know how to get it," she said.

"Those are the people that we see living on the streets and under bridges."

By the time defendants appear before her in the courtroom, Burgess has been told all about their background.

"It has an obvious impact on the decisions that I make," she said.

'A problem-solving court'

Burgess said most of the cases are settled; only four per cent ever go to trial.

"It's a problem-solving court. Those problems get solved at community court," she said.

A report released in 2014 found a statistically significant reduction in offenders committing new offences compared to a control group from the neighbouring provincial court.