

In April 2015, Baltimore saw a period of social and economic turmoil unlike any in recent past. Many Baltimore residents cried for help and guidance. Among the many concerns and calls for change, one stood out: the need for job and educational opportunities. Citizens in Baltimore City have long faced extreme levels of poverty. Decades of unemployment, poverty and inopportunity fueled feelings of restlessness and hopelessness, which were exacerbated by the events of April 2015. The unrest of April 2015 made clear that the problem would continue to grow and undermine the health of the Baltimore community unless changes were made.

As Baltimore City incarceration rates have skyrocketed in recent years, the District Court of Maryland for Baltimore City ("Baltimore City District Court") has set out to reverse this trend through the Baltimore City District Court Re-Entry Project ("DCREP"). Devised by Judge Nicole Pastore-Klein, the DCREP works to simultaneously reduce criminal recidivism in Baltimore while offering the participants a viable path to productive and successful lives. Promoting jobs with regular income contributes to the well-being of all citizens, establishes social stability, and is particularly necessary for individuals with criminal records who face substantial barriers in gaining employment. The DCREP gives these individuals, specifically those burdened by a criminal record, desperately needed access to jobs and educational opportunities.

The DCREP is a court-focused program. It is utilized by prosecutors and defense attorneys alike as an alternative to incarceration or as a condition of probation. The DCREP garnered the cooperation of members of the State's Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's Office, private defense counsel bar, the Department of Parole and Probation, Pre-trial Supervision, and specialty court programs such as the Mental Health, Drug and Veterans Court dockets. Prosecutors make offers to qualified defendants pursuant to which defendants are required to participate in one of the DCREP's full-time job training programs as a condition of their probation or in lieu of jail time. Similarly, public defenders and private defense counsel encourage their clients to take advantage of these offers. The DCREP not only promotes justice by enabling ex-offenders to acquire effective job training and placement but, it also provides individuals with the opportunity to enhance their lives and become productive members of society.

In less than one year (from September 2016 when the DCREP was introduced to the Baltimore City District bench to the present, August 2017), the program gained such traction that the DCREP has grown beyond criminal proceedings. Nearly half of the individuals enrolled have come through various court referrals, dismissed cases and even civil proceedings. In this way, the Baltimore City District Court has made the DCREP available to any resident of Baltimore City who needs assistance in gaining employment, even without formal criminal court involvement.

The DCREP recently expanded into pre-trial services in which there is one designated Pre-Trial Services agent for which individuals report up to and until their trial date. At the time of trial, if the pre-trial participant has complied with the requirements, then the defendant's status may be converted to allow them to continue as part of their probation (if found guilty or receive a probation before judgement) or as a referral (if their case is stotted, nolle processed, the individual is found not guilty or prays a jury trial). Much like the non-probation referrals, the pre-trial participants, if converted, also remain eligible to participate in the graduation ceremony if they complete their program's requirements.

As of November 2017, over 250 individuals have been enrolled in the DCREP: 158 pursuant to a condition of probation; 60 as a result of a referral through one of the outlets laid out above; and, 30 are awaiting trial pursuant to pre-trial supervision.

The University of Baltimore Law Review Article, authored by Judge Nicole Pastore-Klein, will explain the DCREP process in detail, describe its origination by giving a statistical overview of some of the most pressing economic and social problems Baltimore City faces - incarceration, recidivism, high unemployment rates and poverty - and will conclude with the specific role of the DCREP in resolving these problems. Please reach out to Judge Pastore-Klein directly if you would like a copy.