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TOP STORY

Our view: Fix law letting some towns freeload on Atlantic County Central Municipal Court

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The Central Municipal Court of Atlantic County has many advantages for the public. It is located in the renovated old county courthouse in downtown Mays Landing.

Bill Barlow, staff writer

The consolidated county court for municipal cases that Atlantic County started last year under a state pilot program has compelling advantages for the people of the county.

Chief among them is that the central court fundamentally improves the equal justice for all that is a bedrock promise of U.S. constitutional government. And it does so at the local level where people are far more likely to have a case and be in need of that equal justice.

This improvement is so important that the public should be demanding that their municipalities join the consolidated court. When each municipality had its own appointed and operated court, there was the real possibility of 17 kinds of local justice in the county. Some differences surely are small, but it's hard to imagine that the enormous wealth disparities between municipalities don't result in significant differences among local courts. Just look at how much schools and all other aspects of local government differ.

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The prospect for more equal justice doesn't much persuade people who think they might get better treatment and justice from the town court they help pay for. One that might is better services for helping defendants reestablish a law-abiding life.

Addiction and mental health issues are prominent among factors that can overcome someone's will and steer them into criminal justice system.

Retired Superior Court Judge Mark Sandson, who helped create the consolidated court, saw two convincing reasons for it during his service as the area's Recovery Court judge. No. 1, cases involving drugs, domestic violence and mental health issues often turned up first in municipal courts. No. 2, the combination of legal and social services best helped people address these intertwined, seemingly intractable problems.

The Atlantic County Central Municipal Court from the start provided such crucial help, with Jewish Family Service operating a pilot social-services program in the court. JFS social workers immediately connected people with programs that provide mental-health and drug-addiction treatment as an alternative to traditional municipal fines. Andrea Steinberg, CEO of Jewish Family Service, said at the time, "We can't possibly be at every local municipal court. This way we can be in one place, but also providing a consistent service throughout."

Maybe well-off municipalities can afford their own such in-court services, maybe not, and maybe they don't bother. But who wants a society in which wealth and status help determine whether those in desperate need get help?

A central municipal court also saves towns considerable money, and would save them more if the state hadn't bungled a key program rule. The state legislation creating the pilot program included a financial poison pill -- probably inadvertently, but when something preserves part of the New Jersey system of political jobs and favors to hand out, you have to wonder.

The rule says that all municipal legal matters arising from State Police complaints must be heard in the qualifying regional court, regardless of where those matters took place. That might sound like some kind of honor, but it costs money to adjudicate State Police complaints, with fine revenue from them going to the state. This rule's fine if all municipalities are part of the central court.

But in Atlantic County there are 13 municipalities that aren't part of the consolidated court. They get to be freeloaders on the Atlantic County Central Municipal Court, having it handle their State Police cases without covering a dime of their costs.

Saving municipal property taxpayers money is strong argument, and those taxpayers may not care much if they get their savings unfairly. Isn't that the modern way of life, always get and take as much as you can?

We urge the municipalities refusing to join the common court -- Absecon, Atlantic City, Buena Borough, Buena Vista Township, Egg Harbor City, Folsom, Hamilton Township, Longport, Margate, Mullica, Northfield, Pleasantville and Somers Point -- to end their stand against equal justice at the municipal level and for having other towns pay the costs of their State Police cases.

The Legislature, of course, should fix the consolidated local court pilot program immediately. That's easy, just have the court handle State Police cases only from its members' jurisdictions. Make nonmembers pay for their own cases again.

Many legislators make a big show of their virtuous support for every kind of justice for disadvantaged communities. Here is their chance to choose equal justice, where it matters most, over favoring the affluent and politically connected.