

Trailblazers of Justice:

Judges Lawrence G. Brown and Jennifer K. Rockwell Lead Sacramento's Collaborative Court Movement

By Angelina Ray



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In the often adversarial world of criminal justice, where punishment too often overshadows rehabilitation, Sacramento County is home to a quiet but powerful revolution. At its center are two judicial visionaries, **Judge Lawrence G. Brown** and **Judge Jennifer K. Rockwell**, who are transforming the local legal landscape through their leadership of Sacramento's Collaborative Courts.

Their efforts are not just reshaping court calendars – they are redefining the very purpose of the justice system: to restore, rehabilitate, and heal.



Hon. Jennifer K. Rockwell.

Pioneering Collaborative Justice in Sacramento

Collaborative courts, sometimes referred to as problem-solving or therapeutic courts, are designed to address the root causes of criminal behavior. These specialized dockets connect participants to intensive supervision, comprehensive treatment, and wraparound support services in lieu of traditional prosecution and incarceration.



Hon. Lawrence G. Brown.

Judge Lawrence G. Brown: Championing Mental Health and Veterans' Support

Appointed to the Sacramento County Superior Court in 2010, Assistant Presiding Judge Lawrence G. Brown is a driving force behind some of the County's most impactful courts. Assigned the nascent Mental Health Treatment Court in 2013, which had approximately 30 participants, today he presides

over five felony mental health courts with over 700 participants.

Judge Brown also presides over the Veterans Treatment Court (VTC), established in 2014. This specialized court supports veterans charged with offenses stemming from trauma or mental health issues related to their military service. Participants undergo a 12 to 18-month program that includes treatment through the Department of Veterans Affairs, case management, probation supervision, and regular court appearances. Upon successful completion, participants may have their cases dismissed, probation terminated early, or jail time lifted. The VTC has graduated over 170 veterans, and in 2024 celebrated its 10-year milestone with over 200 lives touched.

Judge Brown additionally oversees the DUI Treatment Court for third, fourth and fifth-time offenders and provides judicial leadership across Sacramento's collaborative courts as their Supervising Judge and statewide as Chair of the Judicial Council of California's Collaborative Justice Courts Advisory Committee. His approach is rigorous yet compassionate, focused on public safety through structured rehabilitation rather than incarceration.

Judge Jennifer K. Rockwell: Advocating for Vulnerable Populations

Since her appointment in 2014, Judge Jennifer K. Rockwell has become a steadfast advocate for collaborative courts. In recent years, she has focused on the needs of system-involved people potentially being trafficked and those individuals struggling with mental health and substance use issues.

She presides over the Recovery Treatment Court, serving non-violent defendants charged with drug-related offenses, and the

Proposition 36 Court, which offers treatment in lieu of jail for drug possession charges. Judge Rockwell is also at the helm of the ReSET Court (Reducing Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking), which serves adults charged with prostitution and related offenses. ReSET, now in its tenth year, provides trauma-based therapy, peer mentorship, life skills training, and critical health services, seeking not to penalize but to empower.

In addition, Judge Rockwell oversees Alta Diversion Calendar, a calendar for those with developmental disabilities, and misdemeanor mental health calendars. Further, she oversees a military diversion program, aimed at addressing mental health and substance use challenges of veterans with real, evidence-based solutions.

Judge Rockwell's courtrooms are run to reduce recidivism and connect participants to long-term treatment and assistance. The mental health diversion calendars have more than a 75% success rate and the military diversion even higher. These courts also measure impact by healing, by the restoration of dignity, and by the degree to which individuals are reconnected to themselves and their communities.

Transformative Impact on the Sacramento Community

These courts are not a detour from justice – they are justice realized in its most transformative form.



By emphasizing treatment, accountability, and human dignity, Sacramento's collaborative courts significantly reduce recidivism, promote long-term stability, and alleviate the burden on the jail system and traditional dockets. Participants receive tailored support, including mental health treatment, substance abuse services, housing assistance, education, and employment support, all directed at resolving the root causes of criminal behavior.

The success stories from these courts are not abstract. They are veterans rebuilding trust with their families, women escaping cycles of exploitation, and individuals with severe mental illness returning to their communities stabilized and supported.

A Challenge to the Legal Community: This is Our Work, Too

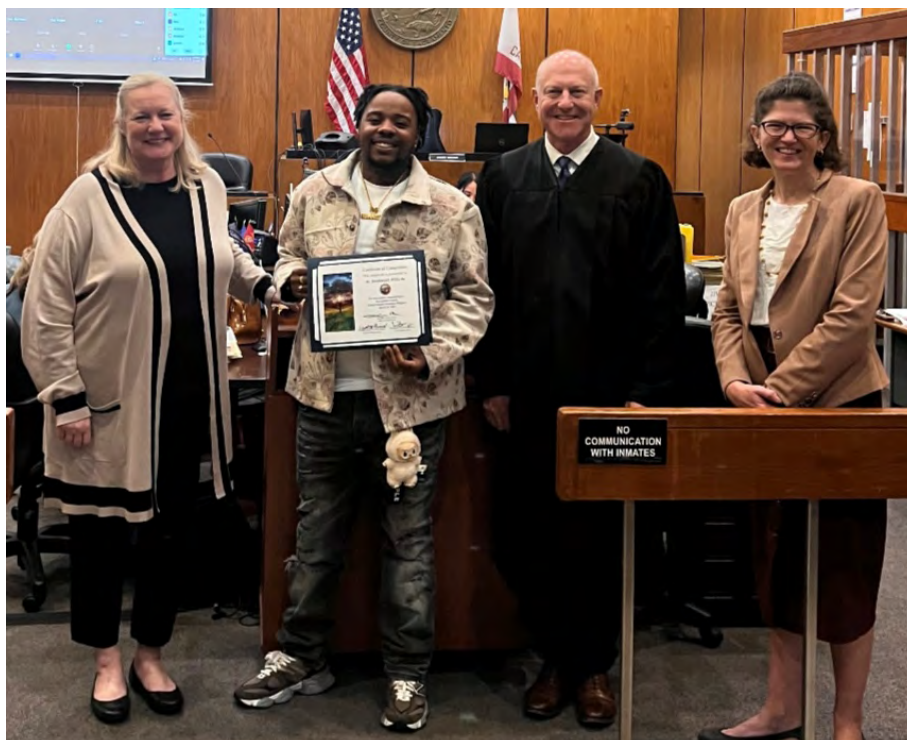
Judges Brown and Rockwell do not stand alone in this effort. Their work invites, indeed requires, the active engagement of attorneys, fellow judges, service providers, and policymakers. If these courts are to be more than pilot projects or passion assignments, they must be viewed as essential instruments of justice and public safety.

How Legal Professionals Can Support Collaborative Justice

1. **Refer Eligible Clients Thoughtfully:** Defense counsel must become fluent in the

eligibility and referral process for these programs. Prosecutors, too, play a pivotal role in triaging appropriate cases into collaborative court.

2. **Shift to a Problem-Solving Mindset:** These courts require a different style of lawyering – one centered on solution-oriented, multidisciplinary teamwork. Lawyers must embrace this collaborative ethos, shedding adversarial posturing in favor of long-term client welfare.
3. **Champion Expansion Within the Judiciary:** Judges can advocate for the creation of new collaborative courts, incorporate rehabilitative alternatives into sentencing when appropriate, and use their convening power to build partnerships across sectors.
4. **Invest in Training and Awareness:** CLE programs, law school curricula, and bench-bar conferences should include trauma-informed advocacy, behavioral health training, and interdisciplinary approaches to justice.
5. **Advocate for Systemic Investment:** Sustainable funding for community-based treatment and judicial infrastructure is vital. The bench and bar must become policy advocates for legislation that supports diversion, recovery, and reentry initiatives.



Why This Work Matters Now More Than Ever

The criminal legal system is undergoing a reckoning. Across the country, we are seeing the limits of punitive responses to complex human problems. Judges Brown and Rockwell are not merely reacting to this shift; they are leading it. Through their work, Sacramento County is witnessing a transformation in its legal system; one that values dignity, accountability, and hope. These judges are not simply managing calendars – they are dismantling decades of institutional neglect and exclusion. And in doing so, they are restoring the promise that courts can, in fact, be places of healing.

From Innovation to Imperative

If justice is to be measured by more than conviction rates and jail sentences, and if we are to create a system that actually works for people, then collaborative courts must move from the margins to the mainstream. Sacramento has the blueprint. Judges Brown and Rockwell have shown us what is possible.

The question now is: *What are we doing with our platform to carry this forward?*

Because justice isn't only about what we punish. It's about who we restore. ⚖️

