



Local community youth gather at the recreation center to have a law enforcement–youth 3-on-3 summer weekend in Plano, Texas.

Bridging the Gap

Using Sports to Build Trust with Local Law Enforcement

Traci Choate

As the weeks of nationwide violence that occurred in 2020 showed, in order to build a better future our communities need to be able to trust all levels of law enforcement. What better tool than sports to bring together law enforcement and youth in a positive setting? Building and maintaining this relationship may contribute to increasing trust and strengthening community bonds: both components of community policing. We want to get local law enforcement and youth on a level playing (and learning) field—literally. Nancy Lieberman Charities has opened 92 Dream Courts,[™] which serve more than 4.2 million children each year. These state-of-the-art play spaces serve as a mechanism for youth to be physically active, build friends, learn teamwork, and form new relationships. The outdoor basketball courts also function as tools for educational programming.

Studies that have examined the relationship between family income and children’s physical activity have demonstrated that children living in poverty have limited access to the recourse of play.¹ The ultimate goal of the Nancy Lieberman Charities Dream Court[™] program is to provide a safe play space for underserved children across the United States.

1. Lesley Cottrell et al., “The Relationship between Children’s Physical Activity and Family Income in Rural Settings: A Cross-Sectional Study,” *Preventive Medicine Reports* 2 (2015), 99–104, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2211335515000108>

The tragic downtown Dallas, Texas, shooting in 2016 that killed five police officers hit home hard, as



During the Dream Court opening ceremony mini clinic, a local youth enjoys one-on-one play with a Plano Police Department officer in Plano, Texas.

Nancy Lieberman Charities is based in north Dallas. We made it our mission to build youth trust with our country and law enforcement. Sports are the great equalizer. You can take people of all ages, races, and backgrounds and put them on a team and they will play. It is not necessary that everyone be skilled in the sport; the idea is that people will play for their team. Outside of competitive games, there is generally

no unfair advantage, simply youth or adults (or both) playing the sport of basketball, being physically active to maintain a better and more sound body and mind.

With the aid of the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) funding, our organization has been able to offer more programming and officer relationship building to Dream Court™ sites. We are incredibly proud to have received three programming awards from the COPS Office. Reports across our sites have told us that areas with Dream Courts™ have seen improved school attendance and less youth involvement with criminal activity. While building trust and relationships with law enforcement through sport, children see positive effects on their life.

Founder of Nancy Lieberman Charities and Basketball Hall of Famer Nancy Lieberman is “so humbled that [we were] able to receive a grant from the COPS Office because it has permitted us to extended programming on our Dream Courts that allows so many students and athletes to be in a safe environment all while having fun with friends. We are putting them in a healthy environment to continue to grow using sports as a great teacher.”

A Dream Court™ donation at first glance looks like a basketball court, but there is so much more to the court and what it stands for: a place for community togetherness, inclusion, and relationship building. The Boys and Girls Club of Ocoee Region in Cleveland, Tennessee, is one of our partnered sites. Before the installation of the Dream Court™ at their club, there was no access to any outside play areas other than a small field for games, and basketball is one of the more popular

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activities in their community. The Dream Court™ is now the center of their programming for both health and wellness and education. Since 2016, it has served as a multi-purpose play space for tennis, basketball, and their wellness program that consists of yoga, body boot camp, high intensity interval training classes, and various other physical activity programs for adults and youth. Through the COPS Office grants, local law enforcement were able to join young people in these and other activities.

“The Dream Court is special to me because it’s one of the things I look forward to the most every day when I come to the club. It’s a safe place to play and it is also the reason my neighbors signed up to come to the club with me,” said Ethan, age 11, from the Reba M. Powers Unit Boys and Girls Club in Phoenix, Arizona. This is just one example of how important it is for a child to have a safe place to be, express themselves, and build social skills while interacting with peers.

The community engagement and education aspect of the program consisting of relationship building and commination provided a sphere of influence for the next generation with a positive outlook on officers. Without the uniform and badge on, each and every law enforcement officer is a dad, mom, brother, sister, son, daughter and so on—they are human, just like everyone else. Their job is public and a sacrifice every

day to protect and serve our country. Some of the children in underserved areas of our Dream Court™ sites do not realize this—especially given the influence of social media. It is so easy for anyone to get online and see headlines about tragic events in our country, if that is all we see, we assume those are the kinds of stories that keep happening. Especially for youth, it is hard to tell what is real from what is fake and easy to misconstrue. Through in-person,

execution of the program event. Thus, these grants impacted not only communities as a whole but also specific young adults working at some of the partnered sites. Joe from the Boys and Girls Club of the Midlands said, “The Dream Court allowed me to assist in the positive development of club youth with law enforcement through mini camps, after school free play and field days with officers to build a safe environment for their community kids.”



Assistant Police Chief David Pughes has fun cutting the ceremonial ribbon with young Boys and Girls Club members in Dallas, Texas.

real-life communication, children can see first-hand all of the good local law enforcement provides for their community.

Engagement activities increase interaction with community members and enhance partnerships among local law enforcement, community organizations, and local businesses. Through program events community businesses supported needs such as the donation of food or volunteers to assist with the

Through Dream Courts™ and our programming, we are bridging the gap between law enforcement and the communities they serve and protect. Local parks and recreation departments, Police Athletic Leagues, and Boys and Girls Clubs, to name a few, program activities at Dream Court™ sites. Law enforcement agencies interact with local youth on Dream Courts™ though free play, tournaments, games, Friday Night Out programs, and more.

Groups also use the Dream Court™ for other various activities such as boot camp, yoga, and Special Olympics Day.

Not only do Dream Courts™ serve as a place to interact with peers and law enforcement; they are also a ground for children to dream big! As the court name indicates, we want youth to have dreams in life that they can one day achieve. Opportunities and places for children to go after school, during evening hours, and in the summer are vital for communities across the United States. Keeping children off the street and away from crime scenes is good not only for the child but for our cities as well.

De’Vonte, age 12, from the Ocoee Region Boys and Girls Club says, “The Dream Court makes me feel like I’m on a court in the NBA. It’s also a special place to me cause I feel like it’s ‘my’ court. I just feel at home when I’m playing on it.” Programming gives youth the opportunity to learn, be safe, and change the trajectory of their life

Our Dream Courts™ play a role in having a sustainable space for children to keep physically active and safe.

For the 2018 grant with our partnered Dream Court™ sites, more than 90 events or programs were hosted with approximately 130 hours of programming and engagement with officers. There were roughly 200 officers from 10 different departments that participated in the program. A relationship is a two-way street. Not only are the youth engaging and building trust with law enforcement but also the officers are learning about the communities they serve on a more personal level. “Our officers patrol the streets everyday, and I don’t know how often they actually interact with the youth in our community unless it’s for cause. Having this program has allowed us to get out, meet the children we seeing

playing and learn their wants for their community. There has been better communication with our staff and the ... community than I have seen in many years,” said Officer Devalon Lee-Arkansas with the Dallas Police Department.



A local officer and community young people gather for summer programming in Prince George’s County, Maryland.

Nancy Lieberman Charities is grateful for the COPS Office funding so we are able to keep giving back, continuing to encourage children and build the ultimate relationship with local law enforcement. Through our programming and unique vision we will continue to build more Dream Courts™ to serve others.



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