



Addressing Drug and Alcohol Addiction Through the Courts

Establishment of a drug diversion court in Boston

SUMMARY

From July 1995 through October 1999, the Boston Coalition Against Drugs and Violence worked with partnering organizations to develop and implement a drug diversion court in the Massachusetts District Court in Boston. The court offers drug abusing or addictive nonviolent offenders the opportunity to participate in a rigorous court-supervised intensive outpatient drug treatment and counseling program.

Other objectives of the program were to increase available jail/prison space for more violent offenders by diverting drug-involved offenders to treatment, to assist in the lasting recovery of these nonviolent drug-involved offenders—and thereby to decrease the recidivism rate of those involved with the court by addressing their alcohol and drug addiction, a primary cause of criminal behavior.

The project team established the partnerships necessary to develop and implement the drug diversion court. Key collaborating agencies included:

- Boston Private Industry Council
- Boston Probation Department
- Boston Public Health Commission
- Dimock Community Health Center (a licensed treatment provider)
- Massachusetts District Court

Results

As cited by the project team in reports to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), key accomplishments of the project included:

- The drug diversion court admitted 551 clients between June 1995 and January 1999. Of these:
 - Some 60.8 percent were male, 39.2 percent were female.

- Some 41.9 percent were Black, 38.8 percent were White, 10.7 percent were Latino, and 0.6 percent were Asian American.
- Some 41.2 percent reported their primary drug as heroin, 13.7 percent as cocaine, and 13.1 percent as crack.
- Some 60.2 percent reported having children.
- Some 87.5 percent reported having an annual income of less than \$10,000.
- Some 17.3 percent reported having overdosed between 1 to 15 times prior to enrolling in the drug diversion court.
- In 1998, the drug diversion court expanded to include the South Boston District Court and the Roxbury District Court.
- In 1997, at the third annual conference of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals, the Boston Coalition Against Drugs and Violence received a national award in recognition of their efforts with the drug diversion court.

Lessons Learned

1. Be prepared for challenges in establishing and maintaining the full support of key organizational and political partners. Although the project team anticipated difficulties in this area, the transient nature of many of the positions of key supporters and the changes in the political climate were greater than expected. (Project Director Cecilia Calvo)
2. Choose a location for the drug diversion court facility carefully. Balancing the interests of the facility, its clients, and the surrounding neighborhood can be challenging. Nearby residents requested that court clients not be allowed to walk through the neighborhood. However, public transportation was not accessible immediately outside the court.

In addition, clients requested that night sessions be available so they could obtain child care and/or maintain employment. Perceiving a threat to neighborhood safety, residents objected. While the level of risk to neighborhood safety was debatable, placing such limitations on clients may have hindered their access to services facilitating their transition to sobriety. (Project Director Calvo)

3. Invest in an efficient management information system. According to Calvo, the lack of such equipment made tracking clients very tedious for staff and the collection of data for the evaluation difficult and labor intensive.

Funding

RWJF supported this project with a grant¹ of \$431,888 through RWJF's *Local Initiative Funding Partners Program* (later called *Local Funding Partnerships*). The matching grant program supported innovative, community-based projects that improve health and health care for underserved and vulnerable populations.² Read the [Program Results Report](#) for more information on the program.

A total of \$447,750 in additional support was provided by several agencies, including the Boston Police Department and the Edward J. Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant Program, a U.S. Department of Justice grant program administered by individual states.

Afterward

As the grant closed, a research team from Northeastern University's Center for Criminal Justice Policy Research was preparing to conduct an evaluation of the drug diversion court. In September 1999, the evaluators and the project team hosted a conference on national drug courts with particular emphasis on lessons learned from the Boston model.

According to the project director, the drug diversion court has served as a model for other drug courts as well as other alternative courts. For example, at the close of the grant, the city of Boston was planning a domestic violence court modeled on the drug diversion court.

RWJF Funds Additional Drug Court Projects

RWJF's experience with the Boston drug diversion court influenced its strategy on substance abuse and later funding of similar projects such as:

- A 1996 project,³ Genesis Counseling Centers (Collingswood, N.J.) led a coalition of Camden County court system officials and treatment providers that worked to establish New Jersey's first drug courts in Camden County. Read the [Program Results Report](#).
- A 1998–2001 project⁴ funded the national publication for drug court professionals to get the word out that drug courts reduce costs and crime. Read the [Program Results Report](#).

¹ Grant ID# 27345 (\$431,888, July 1, 1995 to October 31, 1999)

² *Local Funding Partnerships* ran from 1987 to 2014.

³ ID#s 30315 (\$50,000, September 1, 1996 to April 30, 1997) and 33796 (\$50,000, March 1, 1998 to July 31, 1999)

⁴ Grant ID#s 34781 (\$43,750, June 1, 1998 to July 31, 1998) and 39030 (\$25,000; June 1, 2000 to May 31, 2001)

- A 2001 effort⁵ to track substance abuse assessment, treatment, and aftercare services within the juvenile justice system. Read the [Program Results Report](#).
- A pilot⁶ launched in 2008 to train public defenders in Pennsylvania to identify clients with substance abuse issues and refer them to appropriate health and social services. Read the [Program Results Report](#).

Going beyond simple drug diversion courts, RWJF also funded a \$29.8 million RWJF national program, *Reclaiming Futures: Communities Helping Teens Overcome Drugs, Alcohol and Crime* (1999 through 2014). Read the [Program Results Report](#) on Phase 1.

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⁵ Grant ID# 40596 (\$70,743, February 1, 2001 to November 30, 2001)

⁶ Grant ID# 64727 (\$99,435, September 1, 2008 to October 31, 2009)