



Drug Court Saves Camden County, N.J., \$4.7 million, Lowers Relapse Rate

Alternative sentencing program to provide rehabilitation to substance abuse offenders

SUMMARY

Starting in 1996, Genesis Counseling Center (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.

Drug courts are an alternative sentencing program aimed at treating rather than incarcerating individuals charged with drug-related offenses.

Key Results

- By the summer 2000, 232 adult defendants were enlisted in the program, and 109 adult participants had graduated, including nearly all of the 50 initial participants.
- Crime or drug relapse rate among defendants averaged about 6 percent.
- New Jersey now has seven additional adult drug courts and two adolescent drug courts.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) provided two grants totaling \$100,000 from September 1996 to July 1999 to support the project.

THE PROBLEM

Drug use in the United States has led to greatly increased crime rates, a rise in communicable diseases and mental illness, and an overburdened social service system.

More than 80 percent of those arrested in Camden County, N.J., test positive for one or more illegal drugs. Several jurisdictions, including Dade County, Fla.; Kansas City, Mo.; and Rochester, N.Y., have reported success in the rehabilitation of people arrested for drug possession with an alternative sentencing program known as drug court, which provides treatment and other rehabilitation services rather than imprisonment.

A Camden County task force comprising representatives of the county court system, the Prosecutor's Office, the Public Defender's Office, the Probation Department, a Criminal Court manager, and 10 treatment providers who agreed to participate, examined a number of drug court systems and participated in several workshops detailing the implementation and design of a drug court.

This work led to a proposal for New Jersey's first drug court. The coalition was led by Genesis Counseling Center Inc., a nonprofit counseling center based in Collingswood, N.J.

THE PROJECT

These two grants from RWJF supported the development of a drug court program to provide an alternative to imprisonment for people arrested for drug-related offenses (except for defendants charged with assault or crimes involving weapons), and to motivate them to enter rehabilitation programs and reestablish productive lifestyles.

The first grant (ID# 030315) supported a pilot test of New Jersey's first drug court in the Camden County court system. Camden County contributed \$100,000 in grant funds; 90 percent of RWJF funds helped subsidize counseling services for people without insurance coverage. The other 10 percent supported Genesis Counseling Center's operation.

The second grant (ID# 033796) called for the expansion of the program to include a separate adolescent court in the county and continued community outreach and collaborative treatment for defendants. The county court system also received a federal grant of \$358,000 to continue the program, of which \$268,000 was to go directly to treatment services.

Although the pilot project began as a test with 50 people, by the end of the second grant, participation had grown to 232 defendants. The first 50 participants were volunteers who had violated their probation and were referred by probation officers.

The program is now available to arrestees who are first-time offenders or who have committed a nonviolent crime. About 1,600 defendants have been assessed for possible admission to the drug court. Once identified as candidates, defendants are offered the choice of a jail sentence for their violation or voluntary sentencing in drug court.

Individuals arrested who have a prior record, or probationers who have failed a series of urine tests, can be recommended for drug court by the Prosecutor's Office following a request by the Public Defender Office, a probation officer, or a Treatment Assessment Service for the Courts (TASC) evaluator.

At the outset of the program, participants received an explanation of the structure and requirements of the drug court and signed an agreement to stop drug and alcohol use. Once in the program, participants are required to:

- Produce a clean urine sample weekly or randomly.
- Report weekly to the TASC evaluator.
- Appear in court either weekly or according to a schedule set by the judge.
- Receive treatment from one of the court's 10 providers in the course of each week.
- Tell the truth in court and be accountable for their actions.

The program was divided into three phases totaling anywhere from nine to 18 months:

- **Detoxification.** Drug court counselors and judges help design an individualized program to wean each participant from drugs. Counselors and defendants list realistic and measurable short-term and long-term goals, means to achieve those goals, and strategies to overcome difficulties. Inpatient detoxification is available, if necessary, after which participants receive outpatient services and submit to mandatory urine testing at a treatment clinic. They meet with a probation officer and a treatment counselor on a regular basis and attend court hearings where a judge monitors their progress.
- **Stabilization.** Participants continue to attend individual and group counseling sessions, local 12-step meetings of Narcotics Anonymous (NA) or Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), and court hearings, the latter less frequently than during the detoxification phase. The emphasis at this stage is on continued abstinence and the development and attainment of personal goals. If participants miss counseling sessions or produce positive drug tests, the judge can order them to jail. They may be readmitted to the program after serving their sentence.
- **Aftercare.** Emphasis is on counseling and job training; there is less assistance from the treatment staff. Participants are referred to local colleges and trade schools for academic and vocational training. They continue to report to court periodically and are subject to random drug tests.

When a defendant appears no longer to need supervision—he/she has remained drug-free, gotten a job, and completed all the court-ordered rehabilitative requirements—a counselor recommends his or her discharge to the judge, who has the final decision on discharge from the program. Defendants who complete all stages of the program are honored at a graduation in drug court. The charges against the graduate are then cleared from the person's record.

At the start of the pilot project, the project director thought that a client would pass through the three phases in six to nine months. Experience in the first year indicated that

no less than a year would be sufficient. In some cases, depending on the individual, an even longer amount of time was necessary for completion of the program. And instead of the court moving participants automatically through the system, participants are now required to petition the court and their peers in the program to move to the next level. At each stage, participants must demonstrate how well they understand their addiction and the process of recovery.

By the end of the second grant, the project director realized that in order for drug court defendants to become rehabilitated, the drug treatment facilities had to work as a collaborative unit with the court system. The Probation Department took a monitoring role to assure that the defendants stayed in compliance with the requirements of the drug court and to track their progress, especially in early treatment. The project director himself also worked as a liaison, educating judges, probation officers, and court-appointed individuals about the program.

RESULTS

- **By the summer of 2000, 109 adult defendants in Camden County's drug court had graduated from the program, including nearly all of the initial 50 participants.** About 1,600 adult defendants requested admittance into the program. Of the 863 defendants accepted into drug court, 424 were discharged due to the prosecutor not accepting them because of previous criminal history; of the remaining 439 defendants, 109 had graduated, 232 were participants, and 98 had bench warrants, which means they were due to be in drug court but failed to show up; they will be readmitted to drug court when they do.
- **A job-readiness program was established, and employment was found for 192 drug court participants.** A full-time counselor was assigned to the drug court to help find jobs and to provide job-training skills. At least one company, United Parcel Service, agreed to waive the "no-felony charge" hiring impediment and offered jobs to those who complied with the court.
- **According to the project director, the crime or drug relapse rate among the defendants remained relatively low, averaging about 6 percent.**
- **A separate adolescent drug court was formed in Camden County.** The county's Division of Youth and Family Services held monthly meetings to provide updates on the growth of the adolescent court. Mayors, police chiefs, superintendents of local schools, and drug treatment professionals attended the meetings. Plans were also discussed to have drug counselors and police officers from the ongoing Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) anti-drug program jointly speak to students in classrooms.
- **Significant savings in incarceration costs were realized.** According to the project director, it costs an estimated \$18,811.75 per year to incarcerate a person in the

Camden County jail; providing drug treatment for that same individual costs roughly \$2,200 a year. With 281 people in drug court at the time the second grant was closed, this equates to a one-year savings of close to \$4.7 million a year.

- **The program drew attention and visits from other jurisdictions interested in replicating the drug court.** According to the program officer, a number of other communities in New Jersey (as well as several cities nationally) called the Camden project for guidance on establishing similar programs. The grantee reports that there are now seven drug court programs in New Jersey (in Camden, Essex, Hudson, Passaic, Mercer, Gloucester, and Elizabeth counties), plus two adolescent drug courts.

Communications

The project director has spoken with county representatives throughout New Jersey who are interested in developing their own drug courts, including giving speeches to the Passaic County court system and at the Burlington County Legislative Breakfast. He gave a presentation at the New Jersey Association of Parole Officers at their convention in Atlantic City, N.J.

He also addressed the National Convention for Probation and Parole in Atlantic City about the need for drug courts and for a new view on those arrested for offenses involving drugs or alcohol. He was invited to address the National Association of Drug Court Professionals in Washington, D.C., in December 1997—the only treatment provider to attend the meeting of judges and lawyers. In addition, he has given drug court training sessions in Alabama and two counties in New Jersey.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* has covered drug court graduations. See the [Bibliography](#) for details.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Establishing communication between the justice system and the treatment community is very important.** Learning each other's terminology and how each side viewed the other's domain helped the process run smoothly and assured that each participant could be approached as an individual.
2. **Creating change, however difficult, is possible, but it requires careful organization and integration.** Integrating a number of different parties, in this case the treatment providers, law enforcement officials, prosecutors, and the judiciary, and getting them all to agree on a basic format for the drug court took time, but was a necessary ingredient.
3. **Drug court requires a dedicated coordinator.** During the pilot project, the drug court "team" (members of the court system and the treatment providers) and the project director attempted to coordinate the various elements and details of drug

court, but this was often difficult to do while they were trying to concentrate on their primary functions. Other drug court programs have identified the need for a coordinator to help drug court run more smoothly.

AFTERWARD

The grantee organization plans to continue developing collaborative working relationships between drug treatment facilities and the court system; filling in treatment gaps, such as expanding inpatient detoxification centers; and promoting transitional housing for drug court participants.

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