

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Process Evaluation Of The Oswego County Drug Treatment Court

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Summary

The Center for Community Alternatives' Justice Strategies division conducted a process evaluation of the Oswego County Drug Treatment Court (OCDTC) between September 2000 and December 2001. The principal purposes of the evaluation were to assess the extent to which the program had met its implementation goals, identify other achievements, and recommend strategies for strengthening program operations. The evaluation found that this rural court, having served 76 clients, had successfully met its goals and had demonstrated a number of other achievements, such as strong leadership, integration with the community, and a sense of teamwork. Recommendations generally focused on planning administratively for future expansion and sustaining a high level of attention to clients' treatment needs.

Drug Courts and Criminal Justice Policy

The evaluation of the OCDTC overall found a solidly viable court, one that through teamwork, strong leadership, and attentiveness to holistic recoveries for its clients is likely to demonstrate long-term success. Drug treatment courts represent an opportunity for communities to provide an alternative to incarceration. The specialized services that criminal justice system-involved participants receive in drug court programs for their addictions and related problems have been shown to reduce the likelihood of future drug use and illegal behavior. New York State's emphasis on implementing drug courts throughout the criminal and family court systems, thereby reducing reliance on incarceration, serves both to promote community well-being and to save taxpayers' money. The success of rural drug treatment courts promises to extend program benefits throughout the state.

Background

The OCDTC is one of the first rural, county-wide drug courts in New York State. The court held its first hearing in August 1999 and the following year contracted with the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) to conduct a process evaluation of the court's implementation. The evaluation study was funded by the Drug Courts Program Office

(US Department of Justice) and the New York State Unified Court System. Its purposes were to assess the extent to which the program had been implemented in ways that were consistent with its design, to offer insights regarding particular strengths, to identify strategies for program modifications that would be likely to strengthen its ability to achieve its goals, and to consult with the court regarding the establishment of a simple monitoring system for internal record-keeping.

Between August 1999 and December 2001 the court had enrolled 76 defendants, 11 of whom had graduated. The court is staffed by a Program Coordinator and a single county court judge and operates according to a post-plea model.

Main Findings

The evaluation found that the OCDTC had demonstrated

- ❑ a spirit of teamwork among the program’s primary stakeholders—despite their traditionally differing goals—as evidenced by the adoption of a consensus-building model of decision making in the areas of both policy making and implementation;
- ❑ a strong problem-solving approach to initial challenges (e.g., concerns about threats to due process for terminated participants were addressed by the institution of termination hearings in which the prosecutor and defense attorney present evidence before the judge in order to consider information relevant to sentencing consequences for terminated individuals);
- ❑ success in securing New York State resources to sustain the program administratively beyond the life of the federal grant;
- ❑ strong leadership in serving as a model for fledgling drug courts in the upstate region; and
- ❑ “satisfied customers,” as revealed by a survey administered to upcoming graduates.

Evaluators’ recommendations for meeting current and future challenges included

- ❑ sustaining judicial connectedness to participants as the court expands in numbers;
- ❑ enhancing the court’s ability to pay for treatment for clients who may slip between the cracks with respect to third-party reimbursement;
- ❑ exploring ways to retain participants who are members of demographic groups that the court’s monitoring data have shown to be likely to terminate before graduating (e.g., people needing childcare and those with marijuana dependencies);
- ❑ sustaining cost-savings to the community by avoiding jail sanctions except in cases of exceptional merit; and

- instituting an aftercare component to sustain recovery among OCDTC graduates.

The Study

Justice Strategies, the research, training, and policy initiative of the Center for Community Alternatives, conducted the process evaluation of the OCDTC between September 2000 and December 2001.

Questions Addressed

The project focused on assessing the extent to which the court had succeeded in achieving its implementation goals, as they were identified in its initial design. These goals were to

- implement a network of treatment and rehabilitation support services;
- implement a system of graduated incentives and sanctions;
- enroll eligible defendant and mandate their participation in substance abuse treatment programs and case management services commensurate with their needs;
- enhance the networking and communication between treatment and support services by continuing the efforts of the original Drug Court Planning Committee;
- lower the cost to the community of the prosecution and care of criminal offenders by providing alternatives to probation and incarceration; and
- increase the participants' psycho-social functioning and reduce or end their substance abuse which will in turn result in a reduction in their criminal behavior and re-arrest rates.

Approach

In order to answer those questions, members of the evaluation team observed staffing and status hearings, graduations, formal eligibility hearings, and termination hearings; attended bi-monthly Management Committee meetings; met regularly with the Program Coordinator; and conducted interviews with OCDTC professionals. The evaluation also included an analysis of data extracted from the Universal Treatment Application, New York State's drug court management information system. The research protocol for the study was approved by the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects.

The Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) is a leader in the field of community-based alternatives to incarceration. Through pioneering services as well as the innovative research, policy analysis and training of its Justice Strategies division, CCA fosters individual transformation, reduces reliance on incarceration and advocates for more responsive juvenile and criminal justice policies.

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