
AN OVERVIEW OF THE RURAL TREATMENT COURT TRACK

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VALUE STATEMENT

This conference summary provides a snapshot of several emerging topics discussed during the Rural Treatment Court Track at the 2019 National Association of Drug Court Professionals' (NADCP) All Rise Annual Conference. In particular, it offers creative solutions to address issues rural treatment courts encounter.

ABSTRACT

We provide a comprehensive summary of the 2019 Rural Treatment Court Track at the National Association of Drug Court Professionals' (NADCP) All Rise Annual Conference. The track illuminated unique challenges in rural treatment courts, including but not limited to a lack of substance use disorder (SUD) treatment providers, an absence of housing for participants, and inadequate funding for operations. The Rural Treatment Court Track explored practical solutions treatment court professionals have applied to these challenges. Several of the solutions included using telemedicine to administer medication-assisted treatment (MAT), establishing Oxford Houses, providing participants aftercare, promoting inter/intra-agency collaboration, and using federal funding opportunities.

KEYWORDS

Rural treatment courts, substance use disorder treatment, ancillary services, agency collaboration, federal funding

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Rural Treatment Court Track was to present the most pressing problems rural treatment courts encounter coupled with innovative solutions. The track was held during the 2019 National Association of Drug Court Professionals' (NADCP) All Rise Annual Conference held at National Harbor, Maryland. Jeffrey Kushner (Montana's Statewide Drug Court Coordinator) organized presentations and panels with assistance from American University's Justice Programs Office (JPO) and the Center for Court Innovation (CCI). The multiday event featured experts such as treatment court team members, medical staff, and federal government workers from across the United States. The conference provides a great opportunity for all those associated with treatment courts to come together to discuss best practices and set the stage for innovation and new developments within treatment courts. However, some treatment court professionals were not able to attend the conference, and with those people in mind, we have dedicated this article to recap the track. This summary highlights several topics that emerged from this conference: (1) telehealth, (2) housing assistance, (3) aftercare, (4) collaboration, and (5) funding availability.

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TELEHEALTH

One of the issues raised during the conference was the lack of medical professionals in rural communities. Consequently, many participants do not receive the help they need, or must travel long distances to receive it. A suggested solution was providing telehealth, which is the facilitation and provision of health-related services through electronic methods. This format allows for healthcare providers to offer services to clients remotely. At the conference, a rural treatment court coordinator discussed how their treatment court was able to offer opioid use disorder participants medication-assisted treatment (MAT) even with a dearth of doctors in the area. To conduct this process, a local nurse gave clients medications and a physician consulted with patients through their smartphones. Additionally, in some rural areas, there is an insufficient number of counselors. Several treatment courts have started video conferencing to connect rural participants with therapists who may not be in their region. Virtual therapy sessions enable participants to obtain the essential counseling and behavioral therapies that should be combined with the use of MAT.

HOUSING ASSISTANCE

As participants enroll in treatment courts, the availability of ancillary services is vital for the success of participants. Ancillary services are basic requirements that treatment court participants need as they reintegrate into society. These needs include employment readiness programs, education programming (e.g., GED), health care, transportation, and housing assistance. However, many treatment courts struggle with providing these services. In particular, housing was a big struggle for many rural jurisdictions. Several treatment courts have partnered with Oxford House, Inc. There are funding opportunities available to build new homes under this model. The Oxford House method offers transitional housing to individuals recovering from drug and alcohol addiction. The purpose of this housing program is to allow residents to reside in a self-supported, sober living home environment with other residents in recovery.

While rural communities may have fewer resources, they often have the benefit of closer working relationships among the community and drug court team that can be helpful in getting a participant the support and resources they need in a timely manner. Rural drug courts may need to seek innovative solutions to address the barriers that their participants face more often than urban drug courts.

AFTERCARE

Once participants graduate from a treatment court, they are under less supervision and more vulnerable to relapse. Many programs do not have the resources to create and sustain an aftercare component, but research has documented that repeated contact with justice-involved individuals within the first 90 days after their involvement ends has a significant impact on relapse prevention and recovery maintenance (Scott & Dennis, 2012). Several treatment courts have implemented a user-friendly tool called the Recovery Maintenance Check-In. The tool has a series of questions used to gather information over the phone about any needs a client may have so the treatment court team can connect them with the appropriate resources. It is recommended that the tool be administered at several different intervals for 36 months postgraduation (Sumner & Kushner 2014).

COLLABORATION

Collaboration within a treatment court is tantamount to the success of any program, including inter/intra-agency partnerships. There is a need for treatment court programs to collaborate with multiple federal agencies in order to effectively fund their courts and empower their participants to succeed. Beyond external collaboration, however, is the need to collaborate within treatment court teams themselves. For example, a case study of effective inter-team communication comes from Ogle County in Illinois. The constant use of email and text messages allows all members of the treatment court team to be fully informed with each participant's progress. It is an unmitigable risk with participants in treatment courts that the worst-case scenario can occur and having every team member up to date on a participant is valuable when responding to these scenarios. A further level of collaboration within the team comes from the work that probation officers conduct. Ogle County Drug Court requires that participants make themselves available for unannounced visits from probation officers, which provide significant insights on how participants are doing compared to the regular probation appointments. After the completion of these visits, an email is sent to all members of the team with a report of the visit. This level of collaboration from the probation department illustrates the benefit of all team members' commitment to the overall goal of the treatment court.

FUNDING AVAILABILITY

For some treatment courts, having enough funding to operate effectively is an issue. As a result, it was beneficial to have a session in the Rural Treatment Court Track dedicated to funding resources. An abundance of funding opportunities are available for rural treatment courts and extend further than just the treatment-court-specific funding available from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) were the creators of the Federal Resources for Rural Communities to Help Address Substance Use Disorder and Opioid Misuse. This guide provides an exhaustive list of all the grants and loans available to rural communities and is separated into 26 categories, including transportation, housing, infrastructure and substance use disorder. The available grants include, among others, planning grants from BJA to help new treatment courts establish themselves and train their team members and a Rural Health Care Services Outreach Program provided by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, which provides funding to extend existing health care services into rural communities. Additional grants within this guide include Access and Mobility Partnership Grants to help bridge gaps between service providers and health care recipients, as well as an Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individual with Disabilities Program, both provided by the Federal Transit Authority. The latter of these grants

considers those suffering from substance use disorder as individuals with a disability and provides resources to help these treatment court participants attend treatment, counselling, and court appointments.

CONCLUSION

As we think about combatting drug issues and the impacts they have on rural communities, treatment courts play an important role. To operate successful rural treatment courts, there must be a consistent review of operations and procedures to identify problems and then come up with innovative solutions. The Rural Treatment Court Track sheds light on the unique issues that rural treatment courts encounter, while also providing solutions. It was evident from the presenters that they were committed to implementing effective strategies with the goal of empowering their participants to lead lives of recovery.

To operate successful rural treatment courts, there must be a consistent review of operations and procedures to identify problems and then come up with innovative solutions. The Rural Treatment Court Track sheds light on the unique issues that rural treatment courts encounter, while also providing solutions.

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