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FACT SHEET

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California Mental Health Courts Evaluation

The Administrative Office of the Courts' Center for Families, Children & the Courts (CFCC) is conducting an evaluation of California's mental health courts to determine the courts' processes and effectiveness. Few studies exist that show whether mental health courts have long-term impacts. This evaluation will examine participant outcomes for three years after entering the mental health court program. The evaluation is supported through funding from the Mental Health Services Act.

Objectives

The main objectives of this evaluation include the following:

- Assist and support mental health courts by exploring their progress toward meeting the essential elements of a mental health court;
- Identify specific aspects of mental health courts that are particularly beneficial;
- Develop best practices for dealing with offenders who are mentally ill;
- Identify model practices for other jurisdictions that are interested in program replication;
- Show potential long-term impacts of mental health courts; and
- Determine the cost-effectiveness of mental health courts.

Mental Health Courts Defined

Mental health courts are criminal courts that have a dedicated calendar and judge for offenders with mental illness. Mental health courts apply collaborative justice principles to combine judicial supervision with intensive social and treatment services for offenders in lieu of jail or prison. These collaborative justice principles include a multidisciplinary, nonadversarial team approach with involvement from justice system representatives, mental health providers, and other support systems in the community. Mentally ill offenders are carefully screened for inclusion in mental health courts, with screening and referral occurring as soon as possible after arrest. Each offender who consents to participate receives intensive case management that

includes supervision focused on accountability and treatment monitoring. In California, there are more than 40 mental health courts in 30 counties, including both juvenile and adult mental health courts.

Evaluation Implementation

This evaluation will focus on processes, outcomes, and cost-effectiveness. The evaluation consists of two phases: a survey of all mental health courts and an in-depth study of six specific mental health courts (three adult and three juvenile). The survey data provided in the first phase will be used to compile up-to-date information about all of California's mental health courts so that courts can better communicate and collaborate with each other and so that data are available for funding requests.

In the second phase, we will examine the processes and outcomes of six mental health courts: Orange adult, San Mateo adult, Sonoma adult, Fresno juvenile, Santa Clara juvenile, and Ventura juvenile. We will look at themes such as the mental health court model used, types of clients served, recidivism rates of participants, the court's impact on participants' functioning, and the court's cost-effectiveness. We will conduct one to three interviews and one to three focus groups with mental health court staff, stakeholders, and participants, and we will compare arrest data of participants at a time before their entering the mental health court program to those data at three points after they leave the mental health court program: one year, two years, and three years.

The cost-benefit portion of this evaluation will be conducted separately and will entail analyses of responses to questions that were used to study costs and benefits of drug courts.

Data Distribution

Upon completion of this study, CFCC staff will compile a report of the findings. This report will be distributed to all of California's mental health court stakeholders and will be posted on the Administrative Office of the Courts' website.

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Additional resources:

For additional information about mental health courts, please visit www.courts.ca.gov/5982.htm