

KING COUNTY DISTRICT COURT
MENTAL HEALTH COURT
MID-YEAR REPORT
JANUARY 1 – JUNE 30, 2003

“Thank you so much for the help you gave me. You just don’t know how much it means to me...all you have done in my life. May you help more people that come in front of you. God bless you, and thank you so much. I never want to go back to the life I once lived”.
D.T., a client who graduated from the MHC in February, 2003.

In February 2003, the King County District Court Mental Health Court started its fifth year of operation, the second oldest mental health court in the nation. The Mental Health Court (MHC) maintains its commitment to reducing the criminalization of the mentally ill while safeguarding the community and enhancing the well being of all its citizens.

2002 summary

For the Mental Health Court, 2002 was a difficult year with respect to the MHC’s ability to access necessary treatment services for our clients. Due to the downturn in the regional economy and the resultant statewide budget reductions, county mental health services were curtailed and along with it, lengthy waiting lists ensued for mental health treatment. Since the county budget could no longer provide services to non-Medicaid clients, the MHC relied primarily on Medicaid to fund mental health treatment services. However, Medicaid was difficult to access for our clients, with the delay in processing Medicaid benefits growing throughout the year. Indeed, the delay was so great that some MHC clients were without mental health treatment for up to 6 months in 2002. The MHC reacted to the treatment crises by tightly monitoring the MHC clients (e.g., increased hearings and appointments with MHC staff) and by using the MHC court monitor and probation officers as informal case managers for the clients. Without proper treatment however, the MHC had some clients who fared poorly and some who reoffended due to the lack of treatment. Towards the end of the year, the King County Council recognized the treatment difficulty and reallocated monies in 2003-2004 to fund services for mentally ill and substance abusing defendants in the criminal justice system, including special monies set aside to fund services for MHC clients.

2002 also saw changes in the prosecutorial options available for our clients. In the summer of 2002, the Office of the Prosecuting Attorney allowed diversions from prosecution in exchange for compliance with mental health treatment. Once an eligible client successfully completes a 6, 9, or 12 month diversion, the charges are dismissed. By June 2003, many of our clients were participating in the diversion track.

"I consider myself very fortunate. I worked with excellent people who knew where I was coming from."

J.S., a client who graduated from the MHC in May, 2003.

2003 Mid-Year Caseload

Cases Processed:	284
Number of Hearings:	1,256
Female Clients:	89 (31%)
Male Clients:	195 (69%)
New Referrals:	162
Competency Hearings	21 (7%)
Cases Closed:	27
Graduated	13 (48%)
Revoked	9 (33%)
Other	5 (19%)

Despite the difficulty we had in providing treatment services to our clients in 2002, the MHC still managed a graduation rate of 48% between January and June of 2003. Graduation occurs when in the course of their probation period (up to 7 years), the clients have met their probation conditions including attending court hearings, meeting regularly with their treatment providers, and incurring no serious new criminal convictions.

Thirty-three percent of the cases at midyear were revoked as a result of the client having incurred new offenses. Nineteen percent of the cases were closed due to probation policy or to changes in client residency. The MHC understands that people do not change their behaviors as soon as they enter court and progressive sanctions for client noncompliance will continue to be used in the MHC.

During the first half of 2003, the following demographic data were kept on MHC clients:

January-June 2003

African American	26%
Caucasian	64%
Native American	2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	3%
Age: 18-20 years	7%
21-59 years	91%
60 and above	2%
Co-Occurring Disorders:	

Yes	67%
No/Unknown	33%
Housing Status:	
Unknown	7%
Homeless	34%
With Friends/family	34%
Structured Housing	2%
Independent Living	22%

Mid-year 2003 Summary

Some staff changes occurred during the first half of this year. On January 1, Associated Counsel for the Accused (ACA) became the new public defender agency for the MHC, adding two very experienced defense attorneys and a defense social worker to the court. Other changes included the resignation of a probation officer and the appointment of a new court clerk. Fortunately, the staff changes have been less frequent than in previous years and we now have a solid, experienced team of MHC veterans who work hard to ensure the clients' success. No significant staff changes, additions, or reductions are anticipated in the foreseeable future.

The MHC began its 5th year of operation in February 2003. A process evaluation was completed in 2000 and an outcome evaluation is under way at the present time. The outcome evaluation began in September of this year with the anticipated completion date being midyear 2004. The completed evaluation will be posted on our web site.

To accommodate the earthquake retrofit of the King County Courthouse, the MHC moved in March to its temporary quarters at the Seattle Justice Center, Courtroom 901. It is anticipated that we will return to the King County Courthouse by September 2004.

The MHC continued to draw considerable interest from other courts in other jurisdictions. During the first half of 2003, judges and court administrators from Japan, New Mexico, Tennessee, and Washington observed our court either in anticipation of establishing their own MHC or to troubleshoot issues for an existing MHC. Additionally, the court received many enquiries via emails and telephone calls from court administrators and attorneys throughout the U.S. and Europe.

The MHC co-sponsored a Continuing Legal Education workshop in March on "What is Mental Health Court and How Does It Work?" in conjunction with the King County Bar Association. The MHC team also held a working retreat in April to discuss ongoing operational issues such as modifying our eligibility criteria, screening cases consistently, and discussing opt-in issues. Furthermore, several conferences were attended by the MHC team in an ongoing effort to stay current and knowledgeable about mental health issues.

Acknowledgements

The Mental Health Court was established by visionaries who believed that every mentally ill person has a right to be treated with dignity and who were firmly committed to the belief that the mentally ill should not be “warehoused” and allowed to languish in jails.

The Court wishes to acknowledge the efforts of the 50 original task force members who conceptualized, proposed, endorsed, and implemented this Court. The Court specifically wishes to acknowledge King County Executive Ron Sims and the King County Council, who have been strong supporters of the District Court MHC and who have expressed their support by providing funds to assist the court in fulfilling its mandate.

The Mental Health Court is blessed with a team who is dedicated, committed, and passionate in their efforts to help the mentally ill. The 2003 Mental Health Court team consists of the following individuals:

Mark C. Chow, Judge
Manka Dhingra, Prosecuting Attorney
James White, Lead Defense Attorney
Mary Ortega, Defense Attorney
Susan Butler, Mental Health Specialist Probation Officer
Steve Wede, Mental Health Specialist Probation Officer
Kate Huntley, Court Monitor
Kerry Bramhall, Defense Social Worker
Karan Waterman, Court Manager
Fredese Whitsett, Coordinator/Program Manager

Lastly, we acknowledge our past and present MHC clients, who have worked hard to achieve stability and success in their lives.

The King County District Court Mental Health Court remains committed to bridging the gap between the criminal justice system and the mental health system, to the ongoing benefit of our community and our past, present, and future clients.

Respectfully Submitted,

Fredese Whitsett, Coordinator
Mental Health Court

Mark C. Chow, Judge
Mental Health Court

