

Anchorage Wellness Court

Grants: 2000–DD–VX–0024 and 2002–DD–BX–0038

Grantee: Partners for Progress

Grant Period: July 2000–Present

Project Funding: Two BJA grants totaling about \$560,000

Contact: Jill McLeod (907–929–7936)

Project Summary: The Anchorage (Alaska) Wellness Court has processed about 80 cases since it began in January 2001. The court, part of the city’s district court system, operates with one judge (Judge James Wanamaker) processing and monitoring criminal misdemeanor cases where the defendant has a serious alcohol problem. The majority of the cases are DWI, where the defendant has been arrested three or four times previously for driving while legally intoxicated. Appropriate cases are screened by grant staff prior to voluntarily being entered into the program. Participants are involved in a range of treatments and monitoring during the 18-month program, including:

- Intensive outpatient alcohol treatment and counseling.
- Monitored housing, if necessary.
- Prescription medication, for example, a 120-day supply of naltrexone, a drug that reduces cravings for alcohol.
- Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.
- Moral Reconciliation Therapy.
- Monitoring by the Wellness Court; house arrest program.
- Employment programs.

Participants who maintain sobriety for 18 months while in the program generally receive a reduced sentence upon successful completion. In many cases, these defendants would be eligible for significant jail time due to their repeat DWI charges.

Scope of Evaluation. The main goals are to reduce crime associated with alcohol abuse and maintain sobriety in the participants throughout the 18-month program and beyond. The evaluation, then, would center around tracking the success of participants.

Summary of Evaluability Assessment Activity. Staff from the Institute for Law and Justice reviewed all grant-related materials (e.g., two grant applications, progress reports, etc.); met with the BJA program manager; interviewed the grantee’s representative and the local evaluator by phone; visited the site and interviewed key staff, the local evaluator, and judge; observed the operations of the Wellness Court during a pre-court team meeting and a court session.

Finding. An outcome evaluation would have a high probability of succeeding. The court and the local evaluator collect adequate evaluation data to track the details of participants. Data is available for a possible before-and-after design and a comparison group. The caveat is that the sample size is small. The probability of success will be increased if the grantee hires another case coordinator, as planned. This would double the annual sample size.

Little is known about the success of alcohol courts, as most of the evaluation work in this area has been on drug courts. The audience for the evaluation would include: courts, probation, law enforcement, legislators, and academicians.

Analysis

The Wellness Court is designed to serve alcohol-dependent defendants who have been arrested for serious alcohol-related misdemeanors such as DWI, driving on a suspended license, domestic violence, and more. The goals include the following: (1) reducing crime associated with alcohol abuse, (2) maintaining sobriety in the participants throughout the 18-month program, and (3) having participants remain alcohol-free after the program.

The grantee is Partners for Progress, Inc., a private 501 (c)(3) organization. The grantee has several staff who manage and help operate the program, including an executive director; a case coordinator; and the coordinator of the Center for Therapeutic Justice, who helps track participant information.

The Wellness Court began operation in January 2001. The court, part of the district court system in the city of Anchorage, Alaska, operates with one judge (Judge James Wanamaker) processing and monitoring criminal misdemeanor cases where the defendant has a serious alcohol problem. The majority of the cases are DWI, where the defendant has been arrested three or four times previously for driving while legally intoxicated. Appropriate cases are screened by grant staff prior to voluntarily being entered into the program. Defendants enter a plea agreement with the prosecutor and court that includes attending and completing the Wellness Court treatment plan and the prospect of having charges reduced upon successful completion. Sentencing is deferred for 18 months while the defendant attends the court program.

The design and development of the Anchorage Wellness Court is based on the drug court model. The National Association of Drug Court Professionals (NADCP) defines a drug court as “a special court that is given the responsibility to handle cases involving drug-using offenders through comprehensive supervision, drug testing, treatment services, and immediate sanctions and incentives” (see www.nadcp.org). The Drug Courts Program Office (DCPO) emphasized in its grantee Application Kit that a separate court structure is neither required nor encouraged; rather, drug courts implement a specialized court docket to accomplish program objectives.

During the 18-month stay in the Wellness program, participants are involved in a range of services, including:

- Comprehensive health assessment. Defendants are initially assessed to determine health and addiction issues.
- Structured housing or community residential center, if necessary. The program has partnerships with the Salvation Army, and other structured housing programs.
- House arrest monitoring under the authority of the department of corrections. Ankle bracelets are used for appropriate candidates.
- Structured alcohol treatment and counseling.
- Taking prescription medication (naltrexone) for 120 days. This drug reduces cravings for alcohol. Participants must take the drug daily under third-party observation. They maintain a log with this information in it. Participants also attend support group meetings with others who are also taking the drug.
- Attending 12-step Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.
- Attending Moral Reconciliation Therapy. This is a cognitive behavior training that emphasizes moral reasoning, decision-making and other choice errors made by addicts.
- Monitoring by program staff. The case coordinator makes random home visits and can ask for urine samples to test for sobriety. In addition, the program has a contract with a technology firm that allows participants to be monitored for alcohol use by a device in a telephone called a “sobriotor.” This device operates like a breathalyzer.
- Monitoring by the Wellness Court. Participants return to court frequently (on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis, as needed) to have their case progress reviewed by the court.
- Obtaining employment. Employment is a court-ordered requirement for participants.

Participants who maintain sobriety for 18 months while in the program have charges reduced upon successful completion. In many cases, these defendants would be eligible for significant jail time due to their repeat DWI charges.

An analysis of the first 34 cases shows the following profile: middle aged (average 41 years); two-thirds male, and one-third female; most have prior convictions, spent time in jail and a history of dropping out of treatment; all have alcohol addiction issues; most are minorities (e.g., 56 percent Native American) and 32 percent white. The program staff has calculated that the prior jail time costs for these defendants are more than \$2 million. This does not even include the costs for failed treatment, health care, lost wages, property damage, and family costs.

Program goals include (1) reducing crime associated with alcohol abuse, (2) maintaining sobriety in the participants throughout the 18-month program, and (3) having participants remain alcohol-free after the program. The objectives include having the majority of participants successfully complete the 18-month program. The staff feel that based on their and others’ experiences this is the right amount of time to remain alcohol free to give participants a chance to stay sober after the program ends. The strength of

the program is the multiple treatment interventions described above. These interventions are designed to reinforce each other. The monthly meetings with the judge also reinforce the treatment methods. The judge wields the threat of jail time but also shows support for ongoing accomplishments. Participants are applauded in open court for successful accomplishments. The program activities support the overall program goals.

Another important aspect of the program is the staff. The grantee's staff (chairman, executive director, case coordinator, and coordinator of the Center for Therapeutic Justice) are all very enthusiastic and dedicated to dealing with the clients' alcohol abuse issues. The Wellness Court judge is also very positive and supportive of the program.

In deciding evaluation designs and measurement models, evaluators should look to the drug court evaluation literature. DCPO's Grant Application Kit provides specific guidance to prospective grantees concerning the collection and analysis of data for both process and outcome evaluations. For the process evaluation, the drug court must be able to "summarize its basic operations and services delivery, client characteristics, and treatment outcomes." An extensive list of suggested data elements are also provided, including:

- Characteristics of persons admitted to the program.
- Treatment recommendations, attendance, and progress.
- Number and characteristics of persons successfully completing the program as well as persons who have been terminated from the program.
- Rearrests while in the drug court program and for a period of at least 1 year after.¹

The outcome evaluation to determine program impact requires grantees to analyze data on rearrests, reconviction, and reincarceration following completion of or termination from the program. Grantees must also identify a comparison group "for measuring the relative change in post-program recidivism measures. The comparison group should be as similar as possible to the drug court participants." Grantees are expected to collect this followup information for 1 year, although the application kit encourages drug courts to lengthen the timeframe. DCPO also recommends that individual, rather than aggregate, data be collected. See also drug court evaluations by Belenko, Goldkamp, and Taxman.

The Wellness Court has a management information system (MIS) based on the Buffalo, New York, drug court, which has been identified by the DCPO as a model for drug court management. Clearly, evaluation and MIS issues are inseparable. The same data elements used for program management of client profiles and all program components (e.g., treatment, drug testing, etc.) should be used for evaluation.

¹ DCPO (2001): 121-122.

The main limitation for an outcome evaluation is sample size. To date, about 80 participants have graduated or are currently in the program. The current program can accommodate about 40 new cases per year. The grantee has funds to hire another case coordinator. Another district court judge has also expressed interest in handling a Wellness Court docket. This would increase the sample size to about 80 new cases per year.