

Drugs, Courts and Neighborhoods

Community Reintegration and the
Brooklyn Treatment Court

Written by

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New Experiments in Justice

In recent years, courts across the country have begun to re-think how they do business, testing whether new approaches could improve case processing and result in better outcomes. Two of the more prominent examples of this wave of experimentation are drug courts and community courts.

Drug courts offer addicted defendants who plead guilty to drug charges the opportunity to have their cases dismissed if they successfully complete drug treatment. Their progress in treatment is rigorously monitored by the drug court judge and by court-based case managers. Drug courts seek to halt the revolving door of addiction and arrest, using a graduated system of rewards and sanctions to help substance abusers attain — and maintain — sobriety. The drug court movement began in Florida in 1989 with a single experiment initiated by Attorney General Janet Reno, then the elected prosecutor of Miami's Dade County. Today, there are more than 275 drug courts in 48 states. (By the beginning of 2001, there were over 580 drug courts in operation and hundreds more in development.)

Community courts are an even more recent phenomenon. The country's first such court opened its doors in Midtown Manhattan in 1993. The Midtown Court is a neighborhood-based facility that seeks to solve neighborhood problems by sentencing low-level criminal defendants to community service projects and linking them to on-site social services (including counseling, job training and health care). The goal is to build stronger links between courts and communities, making justice swifter, more visible and more meaningful for local residents. Building on the Midtown Court's success, another two dozen community courts have opened or are in the planning stages.

Community courts and drug courts have essentially grown up alongside each other. While each addresses a different set of issues, they both share some underlying values. Each seeks to encourage courts to take a more aggressive, problem-solving approach, emphasizing the outcomes that courts achieve as much as the process by which they are reached. And each reaches outside the walls of the court system to build links to non-traditional partners, including non-profit and government service providers.

Project Connection

In January of 1997, the Brooklyn Treatment Court, New York's largest drug court, launched an ambitious effort to explore the areas of convergence between the drug

court and the community court movements. With the help of a grant from the State Justice Institute, the Brooklyn Treatment Court sought to answer several basic questions about the relationship between drug courts and communities: What roles can community institutions (police, churches, schools, etc.) play in helping defendants stay away from drugs? Can a drug court offer community residents new and creative opportunities to get involved in the justice system? And more fundamentally, how exactly should community be defined for a drug court? Is it simply geographic? Or is it possible to define community in new ways (as, for example, a community of individuals in recovery)?

Over the course of 24 months, the Brooklyn Treatment Court explored these and other questions. Known as “Project Connection,” the initiative began by targeting two neighborhoods in Brooklyn with long histories of drugs and crime: Red Hook and Bedford-Stuyvesant. Although addiction is often characterized as a “victimless” crime, it takes a heavy toll on neighborhoods like Red Hook and “Bed-Stuy.” As individuals, residents of these neighborhoods are victims of property crimes committed to support addiction. Collectively, they are victimized by street-level drug markets that encourage disorder and undermine public safety. Project Connection implicitly acknowledged this reality by seeking to create collaborations between these communities and the Treatment Court.

Challenges

In attempting to build these bridges, the Treatment Court was forced to confront several obstacles. One of the most significant was location. Put simply, place makes a difference. The Treatment Court occupies a single courtroom within a large, centralized courthouse in downtown Brooklyn. This location is far from the neighborhoods most directly affected by addiction, including Red Hook and Bed-Stuy. Because the Treatment Court is not community-based, it was difficult for community members to feel as if the Court had any direct connection to their lives. Just as important, the centralized courthouse where the Court is located is not designed to facilitate community engagement. The hours of operation are limited, making it difficult for people to visit the Treatment Court after work or school. Even if visitors reach the Treatment Court during the working day, there are few waiting areas or meeting spaces. These logistical impediments complicated the Treatment Court’s efforts to reach out to community residents and the family members of defendants in recovery.

Other obstacles were less concrete but no less significant. One barrier was philosophical: drug courts are not typically designed to engage in community outreach. The Brooklyn Treatment Court is no different from most drug courts in this respect. Since its founding in 1996, the Treatment Court has, like other drug courts, developed mechanisms for assessing and linking felony defendants to long-term drug treatment. It has built an extensive network of treatment providers, created a state-of-the-art computer system to track compliance and devised a comprehensive system of sanctions and rewards with which to respond to defendants’ success and failure in treatment. Prior to Project Connection,

however, the Treatment Court spent next to no time building links to communities. Engaging communities is a new task for most courts, and like all unfamiliar tasks, it demands a new set of skills and resources.

Finally, in implementing Project Connection, the Treatment Court had to confront a problem that plagues courts throughout the country: the growing deterioration of public trust in justice. Put simply, many communities are skeptical about courts and those who work within them. Overcoming this skepticism is an essential prerequisite for any meaningful court-community collaboration. There are no tricks or “silver bullets” here — it takes time, patience and a willingness to demonstrate to community members how and why their input is needed. Accordingly, Project Connection unfolded gradually, building momentum as it built trust.

Strategies

As part of Project Connection, the Brooklyn Treatment Court tested a number of different strategies designed to establish stronger links with Red Hook and Bed-Stuy. The Court began by identifying three distinct audiences for outreach efforts: community residents, family members and police in these neighborhoods. These three groups feel the effects of addiction most profoundly on a day-to-day basis. By defining its target audiences in this way, the Brooklyn Treatment Court sought to re-define the meaning of “community” in light of the drug court’s mission to reduce substance abuse and recidivism.

Project Connection sought to reach out to residents, family members and police, bringing them into the court process to help sustain defendants’ involvement in treatment. To accomplish this goal, the Treatment Court borrowed tactics from the Midtown Community Court and other community-focused judicial initiatives, from the simple (creating a newsletter to keep people informed about the work of the Court) to the ambitious (facilitating face-to-face conversations between residents and addicts in recovery). What follows is a brief overview of some of these ideas:

Open Houses To introduce the Court to residents, family members and police, the Court held a series of open houses that enabled visitors to tour the courtroom and meet the judge and other staff.

Adopt-A-School The Court created a drug prevention curriculum that included guest lectures by clients, case managers, attorneys and the judge. Treatment Court staff implemented the curriculum at schools in Red Hook and Bed-Stuy, teaching young people about the dangers of drug use.

Newsletter The Court kept local residents, police and family members informed of its activities through a newsletter that described the Court and its accomplishments.

Community Service One of the fundamental precepts of most 12 step programs is that individuals in recovery must make amends to those they have harmed through their addiction. Building on this concept, the Treatment Court established a community service requirement for all program graduates, enabling them to “pay back” their neighborhoods by painting over graffiti, cleaning local parks or working in soup kitchens. In the process, they also established meaningful connections to neighborhood institutions — churches, schools, service providers.

Neighborhood Volunteers The Court created several volunteer positions — escorting clients to treatment programs, assisting case managers, helping run group counseling sessions — that were staffed by community residents.

Facilitated Dialogues To explore preconceived notions and break down stereotypes on both sides of the aisle, the Treatment Court held a series of structured dialogues which brought together community residents, police and treatment graduates for facilitated discussion. The conversations, which were held in Bed-Stuy and lasted about two hours a session, were facilitated by an outside consultant. They took place in stages, beginning with separate meetings where treatment graduates and community residents each had a chance to voice their expectations and concerns independent of one another. By airing these issues in advance, the Treatment Court was able to focus the face-to-face dialogues, structuring conversation around topics of both agreement and dissension. The response was encouraging: participants on both sides of the aisle enjoyed the process. Several asked whether the dialogues could become an ongoing resource for community networking.

In addition, Treatment Court staff were regular participants at community meetings in Red Hook and Bed-Stuy. Sometimes, Treatment Court staff spoke about the program, educating churches, police, libraries, civic associations and tenant groups about how the Court works and what its goals are. On other occasions, staff simply went to listen and learn from others. In either case, the intent was the same: to build trust between the Treatment Court and the people who are directly affected by addiction and crime.

Lessons

Project Connection was a valuable learning experience for the Brooklyn Treatment Court. First and foremost, the Court learned just how hard it is to galvanize the participation of neighborhood residents when the Court is not located within the community. Moreover, it is difficult to craft an ongoing role for community members as the drug court goes about its daily work of assessing defendants, linking them to treatment and monitoring their performance.

The community does have an important role to play in the operation of a successful drug court, however. The Brooklyn Treatment Court's experience is that the most critical juncture for community involvement is at the end of the process, when defendants have graduated from treatment and are ready to return to their neighborhoods. For those in in-patient treatment, the return is a physical one. For those in out-patient programs, the trip home may be as much mental as it is physical. In either case, this is when communities have the greatest stake in a drug court's success or failure. It is also, ironically, the moment in the process that drug courts have traditionally neglected.

Make no mistake: community reintegration — the process of ensuring that program graduates make the transition from succeeding in treatment to being productive citizens — is no easy task. It is complicated by a profound ambivalence on the part of community residents — an ambivalence that was clearly articulated by Bed-Stuy residents who participated in Project Connection's facilitated dialogues. Many were skeptical about aiding addicts and law breakers. One participant addressed the recovering addicts in the room directly, saying, "If you say, 'I'm going to make something of myself,' or 'I personally feel I owe the community something,' God bless you, that's a positive thing. But the community is not going to step in and say, 'Gee, what can I do for you. ...What can I do to motivate you?'" On the other hand, another participant acknowledged that recovering addicts would not stay on course without neighborhood support: "The community cannot afford not to deal with [this] problem."

Unfortunately, treatment graduates are often ill-equipped to deal with life back in their old neighborhood, without the support provided by treatment programs. Unstructured time is a constant threat: "As long as I'm ... doing something, then I won't go back [to drugs]," said one Treatment Court graduate. "I can be around my neighborhood, but I got to be moving. I got to be doing something positive. If not, I probably will get high again." Idle time is also a concern for community residents — productive activity is one of the qualities that convinces residents that addicted offenders have indeed changed their ways. "When they get out [of treatment]," said one resident who participated in the Project Connection discussions, "they get bored because now they have nothing to do and they go back in the street."

The dilemma is clear: skeptical residents are waiting for treatment graduates to demonstrate that they are ready, willing and able to be productive citizens. Unfortunately, in all too many cases, addicts in recovery are leaving treatment facilities without jobs, without education, without prospects — in short, they are unprepared to be contributing members of the community. The question for drug courts is this: given limited resources, how can they intervene in this situation? How can they provide graduates with the tools they need to ease the transition from treatment to community? And is it possible to overcome the suspicions of community residents, successfully engaging them in helping addicted

ex-offenders? These are the challenges that Project Connection posed for the Brooklyn Treatment Court.

What follows is a snapshot of what one drug court has learned about community reintegration. This essay grows out of the facilitated dialogues that were convened as part of Project Connection. It explores issues of reintegration from the point of view of Treatment Court graduates, neighborhood residents and the Court itself. The essay concludes with a discussion of how drug courts might address issues of reintegration for both offenders and the community, within their legal and practical limits.

"Keeping It Green"

When graduates of drug treatment refer to their recovery, they often use the phrase “keeping it green” — protecting and nurturing the commitment that sprouted while they were in the treatment program. How do they keep it green once they are back in the old neighborhood — the place where their life of crime and addiction may have begun? Primary responsibility lies with them, of course, but, as Project Connection demonstrated, others also have a big stake in their success: the community to which they return, and the Brooklyn Treatment Court, which ordered them into treatment in the first place.

Brooklyn Treatment Court graduates commonly find that the challenges of return are as daunting as those of overcoming addiction. “For many of these people, addiction is only a small part of the problem,” says JoAnn Ferdinand, the judge who presides over the Treatment Court. “Helping them cure their addiction doesn’t give them a whole new life. It just puts them on a level field where they have to start building a new life.”

Many lack a basic foundation. Before their court-ordered treatment, they may have spent years or decades living from one high to the next, relying on petty crime, handouts or menial haphazard work to meet their basic needs and buy drugs. Some have also alienated their families or have come from families that remain addicted.

Meanwhile, neighborhoods like Red Hook and Bed-Stuy that receive offenders in recovery often view them skeptically. While some residents see a need to help returning addicts and offenders build legitimate lives, others resent the idea of special efforts on their behalf: why should addicts and criminals get help with education, housing and employment that may not be available to people who have never broken the law? One Bed-Stuy resident who participated in the facilitated dialogues expressed the feelings of many when he turned to treatment graduates and said, “The community knows nothing about you...No one owes you anything...Everyone in [this] community is trying to survive, busting their butt...If you want something, you go out there and get it.”

And while the Treatment Court recognizes the importance of “aftercare” for treatment graduates, it struggles to craft a meaningful response. After all, the court’s legal authority ends as offenders graduate from treatment. Does the court really have anything to offer after this point? Does it bring anything to the table

beyond its coercive power? And given limited staffing and funding, is a broader role even feasible?

“I don’t know the answer” admits Valerie Raine, the coordinator of the Treatment Court. “But I do know one thing. Aftercare is something that drug courts need to take seriously. It may feel like a bold new frontier, but remember that just a couple of years ago, people would have said that courts shouldn’t be in the business of getting people clean and sober in the first place.”

The Best Social Service

Heartfelt words of congratulation from the judge and a round of applause from court spectators typically mark an addict’s successful completion of treatment at the Brooklyn Treatment Court. For many, however, the feeling of celebration fades rapidly as they confront urgent and immediate questions: Where should I live? How do I get a job? And until I do, how will I get money for food and other basic needs? Additional challenges complicate these issues: the need to build new relationships with family and friends long alienated by years of addiction; the need to keep a grip on a recovery process constantly threatened by the stress of dealing with everything else.

Though some returning offenders face a life based on public shelters and soup kitchens, most are not without resources. Those with physical or mental disabilities may qualify for Federal Social Security or Veterans’ benefits. Even tightened local welfare programs will provide support for a period of time, though some obligate recipients to fulfill work requirements that complicate vocational training and the search for permanent jobs. Families are willing to make room for some, though treatment providers may encourage clients to pursue greater independence. Others are successfully placed in the city’s expanded number of “supported SRO’s” — single room occupancy residence hotels where social workers develop support groups and other programs for clients.

In general, employment remains the most important issue for Treatment Court graduates. A good job provides a client with steady income, a basis for a structured life and a healthy dose of self-esteem. Raine goes so far as to say that “in many cases, the best social service you can offer someone is a job.”

The Court expects people coming out of treatment to have reached some point of job-readiness. “We don’t expect miracles [from treatment],” says case manager Wayne Willis, “but we expect that a person will accomplish a few basic things.” An understanding of addiction and how to remain abstinent are primary, of course. But the Court also wants clients to have “some connection to the work force or at least some realistic aspirations and a plan” for achieving them.

Offenders may be able to draw on education, job history and marketable skills learned before they allowed drugs to take over their lives. A disturbing number of others, however, “are still very needy” at the end, Willis says. “They may be indigent, illiterate, have a history of homelessness and mental health problems. They may not have any skills or job experience.” In fact, less than 15% of

Brooklyn Treatment Court defendants are employed, and more than 88% do not have a high school diploma or GED.

Treatment programs vary in their ability to prepare offenders for the job market. Some programs help clients study for GED exams and enroll for job training with links to employers willing to hire program graduates. But others, Raine laments, “are not in the business of vocational education services; it’s not what they are trained to do, or what they should be expected to do. Their concern is to provide treatment, get people better, move them through phases of recovery. It may be asking too much to ask them to fix all the socioeconomic and educational issues.”

Mending Family Connections

As rocky as the path to employment can be, many Treatment Court graduates find mending broken family relationships even more challenging. The nature and degree of recovering addicts’ estrangement from relatives varies widely. Some feel anger towards their parents, for example, blaming them for the pain or neglect that caused them to seek relief in drugs. At the same time, addicts in recovery are encouraged to recognize how their substance abuse hurt people close to them. “When I was getting high, I never called,” recalls one. “I went two, three years — they only lived five blocks away. I never talked to them when I was getting high. As far as I was concerned, I wasn’t hurting them. But what I really realize now ... is how it affects them. Here we’re getting better — but some of them have doubts. They need to get better just as we need to get better.”

Addicts with children in foster care or other custody arrangements find themselves facing especially painful or complicated issues upon their return to the community. Those whose children have been raised by parents or siblings find themselves consumed with guilt and confused about how to re-establish themselves as parents. “I was out of their life since [for ten years],” says a recovering mother with three children at home. “So it wasn’t easy for them at first. They knew me, but they knew me as a person that just got high. I would tell the kids what to do, and they would say, ‘But mommy, you weren’t here.’” When the subject of addiction comes up, one daughter remains wary. “Mommy,” she says, “I hope you don’t do it again.”

A woman with three daughters, one who is 23 and twins who are 21 finds that she can only relate to them at a distance now since she separated from them when they were little and she was giving herself up to drugs. “I took them to their god-mother...when they were five and seven; I didn’t want them raised around drugs and violence.” Now they live in distant neighborhoods and don’t find much time to visit. “I stay in touch with them on the phone. One daughter is working, the other has passed her GED test and is trying find work. One of my twins, I haven’t heard from her. I hear she’s pregnant.”

People, Places and Things

As they ready themselves for employability and work on family relationships, returning offenders continue their struggle with issues of recovery. On return to a neighborhood, graduates of drug court supervision face an ongoing dance with

the “triggers” of relapse they have been taught to recognize in treatment. “People, places and things,” they are told, may set off old, familiar patterns of behavior that inevitably lead to the needle, the bottle or the crack pipe. Time spent with old friends who remain addicted, a visit to a place where people gathered to get high, the sight of a crack vial on the sidewalk, a liquor bottle in the trash — any of these may make temptations all too real even as they had come to seem remote in the supportive confines of residential drug treatment.

For some Treatment Court graduates, the strategy is simple: avoid drug-involved friends, even immediate family, at all costs. Elizabeth, for example, lives with a drug-free sister. But she has cut off the rest of her large extended family: “I keep them at a distance, because half of them are still using.” A man who says he did “all my drugging” in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn reflects that “if I go back over there, they’ll get me high before I get them clean. So I know that I can’t go back over there.” A Crown Heights man moved to Flatbush to avoid his old crowd, but finds his job as an electrician sometimes takes him back to the neighborhood. “Every time I see people that I used to get high with, I say ‘hi’, and keep stepping.”

Some find that their old friends are willing to respect their recovery and leave them alone. “As I started changing, the others were still running, doing what they had to do,” says a Park Slope man who moved from that neighborhood after his recovery. “But I kept away from them. They knew better than to knock on my door to ask for anything.”

Others find themselves demanding distance, defending their right to recover. “For me, right down here on Fulton and Grand was my biggest area,” recalls one former addict. “I sold drugs. I go past there now to see my daughter. Most of them know where I’ve been and what I went in for. Most that I hung out [with], they won’t socialize with me like that — that’s a respect thing that I ask from them. (I say) don’t ask me — you should know better.”

Still other former addicts say they find that contact with old friends who remain addicted actually helps them heighten their own sense of rehabilitation. “For me, I lost a lot by getting high,” says one man. “Sometimes I see people who I used to get high with, I look at drug addicts now and think, ‘Damn, I was one of them.’ That keeps it real for me.”

Maintaining sobriety, of course, requires positive action as well as simply avoiding people or situations that might encourage relapse. Treatment Court graduates seek continuing help by joining Narcotics Anonymous, church groups or other organizations where they can link up with recovering addicts, calling on them when they feel especially anxious. Others maintain relationships with staff members of their residential treatment programs. “I keep in touch with my director,” one woman says. “I was a good person while I was there. I didn’t give those people any problems, so now they are there for me.”

Another woman benefits from her housing placement in a residence where most of the other tenants are female addicts in recovery. “I have plenty of new

friends, plenty of people in my life,” she says. “I keep phone numbers; when I’m going through something, I can call them. They also call me. We’re all females, all coming out of programs, all trying to live life on life’s terms.”

Empty Hours

Beyond people, places and things, many graduates report a more insidious threat to sobriety: empty hours. Especially in the early weeks back in the community, offenders may find themselves with plenty of time on their hands and no satisfying way to fill it. After months in a residential treatment program based on full days of rigorously scheduled activity, freedom and idleness cause a depression that invites a return to substance abuse.

“I’m doing a little volunteer work, a little stipend work, and maybe I can do ten hours a week,” reports one man. “But most of the other time now, what do I do? I’m stuck in the house watching television and waiting to find out if I passed a test and can get into school. There’s just too much idle time.”

“I go through it every week,” says another. “This week I was sitting there and I’m watching baseball, and the game is over, and there’s nothing else coming on... I caught myself going to the store, I walked past the liquor store, I see the liquor store, I’m like, ‘Damn, I usually be drinking.’ And I said, ‘No, I’ll find something to do. If I have to talk to somebody for like an hour.’ When that hour is up, I’m back at idle time again, I’m just like, ‘Goddamn!’ Sitting there, I just can’t wait to go to sleep, that takes up the most time of the day. I don’t want to wake up.”

A Skeptical Neighborhood

Bedford-Stuyvesant is a sprawling north Brooklyn neighborhood of 140,000 residents. It is also one of the largest black communities in New York City. While it is home to many poor people, the area more typically consists of working families who live on quiet streets lined with neat row houses. Even so, Bedford-Stuyvesant has seen more than its share of drug dealing and drug abuse — more Treatment Court defendants come from Bed-Stuy than any other neighborhood.

“I grew up in Harlem when heroin was king, and I came to Brooklyn in 1954,” says neighborhood resident Alma Carroll. “Every generation brings a new set of addicts... We never learn enough about the addiction, never learn enough about how to fight it, and so we just keep on with the struggle.” Because of this history, Bedford Stuyvesant has grown accustomed to addicts in recovery returning to live within its boundaries; while most residents aren’t actively hostile to treatment graduates, they remain skeptical of their prospects.

One woman reports that a friend completing treatment asked her how she would feel if he returned to the neighborhood. She told him, “I want you to come back different, not just clean.” She had seen too many addicts come home from treatment drug free, but without having resolved the personal or family issues that led them into addiction in the first place. All too many quickly relapse. “I don’t want to have to keep accepting someone over and over again,” she says. She wonders if it is possible to learn how the person behaved in the

treatment program (“Was he an A student or was he a D?”).

She also expresses skepticism about treatment programs’ pledges to follow up effectively with clients. “This particular guy, when he came out ... his counselor seemed like [he] didn’t care. They knew where he lived and what neighborhood he was in [but] when he started dibbling and dabbling, I was the one that knew. His counselors didn’t know. ... So my thing is, where’s the one-on-one? Some people are not good in groups. Where’s the counselor who could have contacted him and said, ‘Hey, man, you’ve been out for a while. What’s up?’”

A local police lieutenant points out that recovering addicts aren’t the only people who have trouble acquiring job skills and finding employment. That creates an issue of equity. “There are people that I encounter every day that can’t get employment or training, just everyday people trying to survive regularly. ... They may see [recovering addicts] as a smack in the face. They’re trying to survive. There are no programs [for them]. There’s nothing to help them. If they get on drugs, all of a sudden there is a host of services available. You can get food stamps. You can get welfare. You can get a lot of things because you’re on drugs. But if you’re that citizen that’s just trying to survive and really elevate yourself, there’s nothing.”

A Second Chance Community

There is no unanimity in Bed-Stuy about addiction. Even the police lieutenant admits, “I don’t think the community cares whether a person is a drug addict or not. I think the main focus is what that person is doing for the community. ... When you walk in that door, it doesn’t really matter what you did. It matters what you’re going to do. No one owes you anything and no one has an obligation to give you anything.”

Lewis Watkins, a local community leader, describes Bedford Stuyvesant as “a second chance community” given the large number of families with members who have struggled with addiction. The neighborhood also remains home to a large number of programs for recovering addicts and other troubled people. To the extent they are aware of them, however, residents feel the programs don’t go far enough to meet the needs of their clients. Many share the concerns of Treatment Court graduates about idle time. “If you’re doing more things and you’re feeling good about yourself, you know, you don’t have as much time to get into bad thoughts,” one woman observes, suggesting that community groups could do more to provide volunteer or community service activities. Another man says that community groups should do more to develop entry level jobs for returning offenders.

Some residents also worry that programs for recovering addicts may focus intensively on them while neglecting their families. “I would like to see them reach out not only to the client but also to the family, because there’s damage out there as a result [of substance abuse],” one man says. “If I was the father and I had a family and a wife and I’m using drugs and I’m ripping them off, when I’m finally put in this treatment mode, the family is pretty well banged up...Sooner or

later some of them might follow in my footsteps from the pressure and the tension and the problems. ... So I would like to see them help that family out; the support service is for the individual, but the family needs help too.”

Finding Community Resources

In addition to sharing similar concerns about recovery, residents and Treatment Court graduates both struggle to locate neighborhood programs capable of offering help and support. One of the most fascinating lessons from the facilitated dialogues in Bed-Stuy is that many residents are unaware of all the services available in the community. More important, community-based programs are often not aware of each other.

A woman who works as the principal of a public school reports that she often finds herself confronted with parents who are recovering addicts and who “are going through some sort of crisis and need ... immediate assistance. Yet I’m not aware of any emergency help for substance abusers.” This comment draws an immediate response from another member of the group, who introduces herself as an outreach worker for the Bedford Stuyvesant Family Health Center. “One of our functions is to deal with substance abusers,” she says. “We have an office right here, and we are up and running.” She lists the available services: “female groups, male groups, integrated groups; we have adolescent rap sessions for ages 10 to 21. ... We’ve got activities that go on all day long just for people who don’t have anything to do.”

The session ends with a discussion of the need for an information clearinghouse, hotlines or a guide to community resources — projects that could generate immediate benefit at low cost.

The Role of the Treatment Court

The difficulties that program graduates face upon returning from treatment is a daily fact of life at the Brooklyn Treatment Court. Judge Ferdinand points to cases of offenders who nearly complete their treatment program, never failing a drug test, only to relapse a week before they are due to graduate. “These people may be saying, ‘I’m not ready; I’m not ready to let go of the support network.’”

Drug treatment providers know how to return people to sobriety in a highly structured therapeutic community. Successful clients then need to find their own way and build their own structure without drugs. Many clients sense the dimensions of this task all too well. Especially for those with little education, no marketable skills and no job experience, the challenge seems insurmountable. Many Treatment Court graduates must also navigate their way without any immediate role models or family support — very few people in their immediate circle may be employed in legitimate industry.

These are thorny economic, cultural and educational issues that policy-makers and academics have struggled with for generations. Given the enormity of the problem, what can drug courts do to aid the reintegration process?

Some small answers arise naturally from the Brooklyn Treatment Court’s ongoing operations. Addicts find that the Court plays an important role, for

example, in helping them rebuild relations with families by encouraging their appearance in the courtroom. It generally pleases offenders when parents show up on days when they are before the judge to receive congratulations for completing a phase of the treatment regime.

“My mother was there the first two times I advanced. And now that I'm getting ready to graduate, she is coming again,” one man says. “She is with me this time. Before, she was, like, you're not going to do this. But now that she understands what I'm going through, she is with me. ... Before, she doubted everything.”

Blueprint for the Future

Helping graduates mend broken family relationships is only part of the answer, of course. Project Connection has pointed the Brooklyn Treatment Court in some interesting new directions as well. Some are modest initiatives that the Court has already begun to implement. Others are more ambitious undertakings which will require additional planning and funding. Taken together, they comprise a starting point for further conversation about drug courts and community reintegration:

Alumni Groups In an effort to build networks of peer support, many drug courts have set up an “alumni bureau” that brings groups of graduates together on a regular basis for discussions with case managers about managing addiction and maintaining sobriety. At the Brooklyn Treatment Court, these conversations have been expanded to include topics of reintegration. In addition, the Court has used the meetings as forums for introducing graduates to community-based resources — schools, job training programs and service providers.

Job Training Of all the obstacles to successful reintegration, employment is one of the most difficult to address. Drug courts need to focus more attention on this issue, perhaps even adding job placement specialists to their permanent staffs. Just as important, drug courts should look to create partnerships with established job training programs that work with difficult-to-place populations. These will not be easy links to build. Many job training programs have experienced significant frustrations in attempting to deal with offender populations, for all the reasons one might imagine — reliability, substance abuse, violence. But drug courts have something to offer these programs above and beyond most criminal justice referral sources — solid screening to ensure that participants have a track record of sobriety, ongoing case management and judicial monitoring of both drug treatment and perhaps participation in the employment program. For these reasons, a partnership between a drug court and a job training program may stand a better chance of success than a stand-alone job program directed at offenders.

Community Service Many offenders have come to view the Brooklyn Treatment Court’s community service requirement as a kind of rudimentary job training. The Court identifies neighborhood sites — parks, day care centers, soup kitchens — that need cleanup work, painting or other help. Offenders must complete three assignments lasting from two to six hours each. The program gives offenders a way to fulfill one more step towards recovery by giving back something to a community they damaged during years of addiction; it also teaches job skills, however basic. In addition, community service signals something important to the community about both the Treatment Court and its clients. By engaging community residents in the process of identifying local hotspots and selecting service projects, the Court can use community service as a vehicle for building neighborhood buy-in. By providing a pool of free labor, the Court can help the neighborhood target visible problems like graffiti and trash in a local park that might not get addressed otherwise. In the process, community service also helps addicts in recovery demonstrate their worthiness to the neighborhood, offering them opportunities to get to know community residents, as they perform community service side-by-side with local volunteers.

Extending the Judge’s Authority At the Brooklyn Treatment Court, like many drug courts, graduates go through three phases of Court supervision before they officially graduate from the program. Perhaps some of the basic elements of aftercare — looking for a job, getting an education, coming up with a plan for housing, family reunification — should be made a more formal part of a client’s third phase of treatment. Judges could then bring the coercive power of the court to this aspect of recovery, pushing clients towards a firm hold on a stable life and withholding graduation until at least some of the basics are in place.

Target Neighborhoods As long as drug courts continue to be located in centralized courthouses and accept cases from multiple neighborhoods, they will continue to struggle with building meaningful community links. It is probably unrealistic to expect a drug court to develop connections with all of the neighborhoods it serves, particularly in large and mid-sized cities. One of the lessons of Project Connection is that drug courts may do best to focus their energies on one or two selected neighborhoods that produce the majority of drug court clients. These neighborhoods could be the site of ongoing facilitated dialogues that bring together community residents and treatment graduates for structured conversation. Drug court judges might also participate in these discussions, providing them with a deeper understanding of the impact of their decisions on neighborhoods. Finally, target neighborhoods could also be the focus of resource guides that provide

graduates with a sense of the resources and opportunities available to them in their communities.

Neighborhood Recovery Centers Offenders who participated in the Brooklyn Treatment Court’s facilitated dialogues emphasized the problems posed by idle time as they returned to their communities. To help address this concern, drug courts might explore the possibility of developing links with neighborhood-based recovery centers — or perhaps even creating them where they don’t exist. These would be storefront facilities open to any individual in recovery, offering a safe place to socialize and engage in productive activities. The focus would not be on treatment per se, but rather on services and support related to treatment — family counseling, job training, English-as-a-second language classes, etc. Drug courts might explore colocating these recovery centers at existing community-based programs. Perhaps a local rec center could open its doors to treatment graduates one evening each week. Or perhaps a church could donate its basement to the effort. Drug courts will need to be creative and flexible if they hope to make such an effort work.

Conclusion

In less than a decade, drug courts have become a permanent feature of the judicial landscape in this country — almost every state has one, and many states have several. The expansion of the drug court movement has been driven by results: drug courts from Florida to California have succeeded in moving thousands of addicted offenders from substance abuse to sobriety. In the process, drug courts have encouraged courts to change the way they do business, adopting a problem-solving approach and building partnerships with government and non-profit treatment providers outside of the criminal justice system. These are not insignificant accomplishments.

As the Brooklyn Treatment Court’s experience with Project Connection makes clear, however, these achievements do not mean that the drug court story is finished. Far from it. What remains for drug courts is to figure out how to make a difference in the next chapter of their clients’ lives: the return to independent community living after graduation from treatment. After all, the ultimate test for drug courts is not whether their clients graduate, but whether they are able to live drug-free and contribute to society. It almost goes without saying that treatment graduates will not accomplish this unless they are able to survive the temptations and obstacles that exist in their neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, Project Connection taught the Brooklyn Treatment Court another important lesson as well: most drug courts are not equipped — in terms of staffing, design or philosophy — to re-engineer the relationship between their graduates and neighborhoods. Location is a particularly imposing hurdle — it is difficult to engage a community from a centralized courthouse. Still, drug courts cannot afford to turn their backs on neighborhoods. Project Connection suggests

a number of strategies — from alumni groups to neighborhood recovery centers — that are worthy of further experimentation. For many drug courts, launching these types of initiatives will be a new undertaking and a significant expansion of the way they view their roles. But the time is ripe for drug courts to move in this direction, especially if they hope to fulfill their promise of transforming addicts in recovery into productive members of society.

Center for Court Innovation

The winner of an Innovations in American Government Award from the Ford Foundation and Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, the Center for Court Innovation is a unique public-private partnership that promotes new thinking about how courts can solve difficult problems like addiction, quality-of-life crime, domestic violence and child neglect. The Center functions as the New York State Unified Court System's independent research and development arm, creating demonstration projects that test new approaches to problems that have resisted conventional solutions. The Center's problem-solving courts include the nation's first community court (Midtown Community Court), as well as drug courts, domestic violence courts, youth courts, family treatment courts and others.

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