

**Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies
Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs
FY 2018 Outside Witness Testimony**

**Statement of Angela Blackwell, PharmD
of Helena, Alabama, and
drug court graduate**

**on behalf of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals
May 12, 2017**

To Chairman Shelby, Ranking Member Shaheen, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to have the opportunity to submit my testimony and respectfully request my statement be entered into the record.

Today I am a mother, a pharmacist, a taxpayer, a home owner, and a leader in my community. A decade ago, I was behind bars after my addiction to opioid painkillers reached its final peak. I was homeless, facing 13 felonies, years in prison, and losing custody of my daughter. That all changed when I was offered drug court. Drug court gave me the tools I needed to enter a life of recovery. Drug court must be expanded to serve the more than one million addicted individuals in the justice system who, like me, desperately need this life saving treatment.

Drug court and veterans treatment courts are an effective solution to the opioid epidemic facing this country and they are evidence-based criminal justice reform in action. I urge you to support \$43 million for the Drug Court Discretionary Grant Program and \$7 million for veterans treatment courts at the Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs in fiscal year 2018.

I know the lifesaving benefits of these programs firsthand. In 2000, I arrived in Alabama to attend pharmacy school, I never so much as touched drugs, legal or otherwise. I came from a stable home life. My parents were strict but always gave me and my siblings the love and support we needed to achieve all that life had to offer. But as I progressed in school, I veered from their path and entered relationships that led me to begin using drugs.

At first it was OxyContin at parties but, by the time I graduated in 2004, it evolved into other, stronger drugs used multiple times a day as an outlet for stress and grief. It didn't take long for me and my then husband to come up with creative ways to obtain prescriptions for drugs from the pharmacy where I was employed. To pay for it all, I took out multiple loans of \$5,000 or more as a temporary fix to my growing debt to addiction.

Those creative solutions to get my fix eventually caught up to me and I, along with my husband, were arrested for calling in fake prescriptions. Even after I was sent to jail, dismissed

from my job and the pharmacy board revoked my license, I had no intention of curbing my substance use.

With no job and a \$600 a day addiction to support, it wasn't long before I lost my home and nearly everything else I owned, forcing me to live in a truck. But this, again, wasn't enough to stop me from feeding my addiction. I began stealing materials and appliances from construction sites and selling them to support my habit. During this period, I found myself in a cycle of stealing, selling what I stole, buying drugs, getting high and repeating it again. I broke the cycle only every three or four days to shower at a truck stop.

It was during the period when I was homeless that my daughter, Charleigh, was born. My addiction had such a strong hold on me that even the birth of my beautiful child was not enough for me to seek help. In the first year of Charleigh's life, I consistently left her in the care of relatives and others where I knew she would be cared for while I continued to feed my growing addiction.

Finally, in 2006, more than a year of stealing to support my addiction caught up to me. I was arrested outside a newly constructed subdivision after being spotted taking items from the model homes. All in all, I faced 13 felony charges including several unlawful distribution and receiving stolen property charges. I was facing untold years in prison - years without my daughter I would never get back.

It was while I was placed in jail to sober up that I was offered admission to the Shelby County Drug Court. I was finally ready for help, so I enthusiastically agreed and was placed under the supervision of Judge Michael Joiner. In the program, I was given the accountability I desperately needed: random drug tests multiple times a week, access to public and private support services and a spectrum of treatment services to ensure I would remain drug free. Even despite my missteps, no one in the program gave up on me, ensuring I couldn't give up on myself.

As I moved through the program and my addiction began to loosen its grip on me, I set my sights on getting my license to practice pharmacy back. Before I could get there, I had a lot of wrongs to make right. I spent two years living only for my addiction but I needed even more years after my arrest to complete the requirements necessary to get my license back. In 2010, four years after my arrest leading me to drug court, the Alabama Board of Pharmacy reinstated my license.

All the support and access I was given in drug court gave me the strength to overcome my addiction and enter recovery. Nationally, I am one of the up to 75 percent of drug court graduates who find that strength and never reoffend again after graduating the program. Moreover, I alone saved the State of Alabama nearly \$175,000 by spending the last decade as a productive member of society, rather than behind bars. But those benefits are nothing compared to the immeasurable effects of being reunited with my daughter. Today, I am the mother every child deserves, all to the credit of drug court.

As you look for effective programs to help communities devastated by the opioid epidemic, look no further than drug court and veterans treatment court. As you look for models of criminal justice reform, look no further than drug courts and veterans treatment courts. Nationwide, they successfully reduce crime, save billions of tax dollars, and transformed the lives of more than 1.25 million Americans in the nearly three decades since their creation.

Now, more than ever, Congress must focus its limited resources on proven programs that not only return measurable successes like mine, but also save taxpayer dollars. There is simply no better investment this Congress can make than drug courts. My story is just one example of the effectiveness of these courts. Rigorous scientific research shows they decrease crime, save taxpayer dollars, rehabilitate offenders, and restore families and communities.

I strongly urge an investment of \$43 million for the Drug Court Discretionary Grant Program and \$7 million for veterans treatment courts at the Department of Justice. Adequate funding for drug courts and veterans treatment courts will ultimately save countless lives and tax dollars in not only Alabama, but every state in this great nation.