

House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies

“FY 2021 Public Witness Testimony”

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To Chairman Serrano, Ranking Member Aderholt, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to have the opportunity to submit my testimony on behalf of this nation’s more than 4,000 drug courts and the 150,000 people they will connect to lifesaving addiction and mental health treatment this year. For more than three decades, drug courts have offered unprecedented success in finding solutions to the nation’s opioid and other addiction epidemics by simultaneously promoting both public health and public safety. **I am requesting the Congress maintain the enacted fiscal year 2020 numbers of \$80 million for the authorized Drug Court Discretionary Grant Program (Pub. L. 115-271) and \$23 million for the authorized Veterans Treatment Court Program at the Department of Justice (Pub. L. 114-198).**

I serve as the chief executive officer of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals. In my role, I have the privilege of seeing the positive change drug courts are making in communities large and small throughout the country. These programs are providing an actionable, evidence-based solution to communities in crisis over the unprecedented growth of opioid use disorders in nearly every state and county. The 35,000 people working in American drug courts today are on the front lines of an addiction epidemic, providing individualized care to the justice system’s most vulnerable, preventing needless overdoses, cutting addiction-related crime, and saving taxpayer dollars.

Through drug courts, people involved in the justice system due to an underlying substance use or mental health disorder are connected to treatment, services, and judicial supervision. Many of these lifesaving programs would not exist today without these authorized programs created by Congress through years of bipartisan support. The restored lives of so many thousands are thanks in no small part to this support.

When I began my career as a South Carolina prosecutor in the 1990s, I saw what so many across the country were seeing: the same individuals repeatedly appearing before the courts for crimes committed in service to their substance use disorders. While the courts, law enforcement, and taxpayers bore a great burden in this revolving door, it was the children and families of those stuck in the cycle of addiction who bore the greatest cost.

More than three decades later, the costs of substance use are still the same, but drug courts are helping mitigate them in all 50 states. Drug courts and other treatment courts are on the front lines of the opioid/stimulant epidemic, including the recent rise in methamphetamine use. These

programs are leading a comprehensive, evidence-based response that uses community-based treatment, including FDA-approved medication; coordinates with local law enforcement to ensure stringent supervision; and offers wraparound services to improve housing, employment, and family reunification.

But the evidence showing drug courts work isn't just anecdotal. Drug courts not only are the most researched criminal justice innovation in American history, they continue to be proven the most successful. In fact, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) examined over 30 scientifically rigorous studies involving more than 50 drug courts throughout the country. The GAO found re-arrest rates for drug court graduates to be up to 58 percent below comparison groups, and cost-benefits as high as \$47,852 per participant.

The GAO identified the Department of Justice National Institute of Justice Multi-Site Drug Court Evaluation (MADCE) as "the most comprehensive study on drug courts to date." This five-year study confirmed that drug courts improve education, employment, housing, and financial stability for nearly all participants. In addition, the MADCE found that they promoted reunification, reduced foster care placements, and increased the rate of addicted mothers delivering fully drug-free babies.

To bring all this research together, in 2013, NADCP released the *Adult Drug Court Best Practice Standards*. The standards incorporate more than a quarter-century of what is known about drug courts, defining appropriate practice for drug courts across a spectrum of highly researched principles, including target populations, team member roles, equity and inclusion, evaluation, and others.

Since their release, the effect of the standards on the drug court field has been profound. New drug courts are using the standards as the foundation for building a successful program, and existing courts are using them to adopt new policies, retool old ones, and expand capacity. In fact, grants issued by the Department of Justice and other agencies to drug court programs require fidelity to the *Adult Drug Court Best Practice Standards*. In response, a majority of states have either adopted the standards as their primary operational guide, are receiving training and technical assistance from NADCP to do so, or are incorporating the standards into their state guidelines for drug courts.

Beyond the statistics, there are real people whose lives and families are profoundly changed by the drug court model. I can think of many dozens of inspiring drug court success stories I've encountered in my career, people who are parents, veterans, professionals, young and old; drug courts have saved individuals from every walk of life.

Take, for example, Travis from Carroll County, Maryland. Raised by a supportive family, he was active in sports, had college scholarship offers, and even toured Europe as a young man playing rugby. But when multiple tragedies struck his young life, Travis turned to opioids as a solution. Soon the pills gave way to heroin, and Travis entered full-blown addiction. For more than 15 years, he cycled in and out of treatment programs and jail, racking up one criminal charge after another. Finally, his crimes caught up with him, and Travis was given a choice: serving eight to ten years in a state prison or drug court. He chose drug court and hasn't looked back.

The Carroll County Drug Court team got Travis the help he needed, connecting him to treatment services while holding him accountable for his actions in service to his addiction. Like many drug court participants, he struggled at first, but he says that when drug court exposed him to recovery for the first time, the light came on, and his life started getting, in his words, amazing.

Today, Travis's job sends him all over the world, where he supervises employees as well as millions of dollars of merchandise. This is something, he says, that never would have been possible while he was living in addiction.

There's also Tim. Tim served in the United States Marine Corps and was among the first to deploy to Iraq. He was also one of the first to return, before the country understood what struggles service men and women would face readjusting to civilian life. Tim used drugs and alcohol to help numb the confusion and sudden loss of camaraderie, and just days after returning home to Pennsylvania, he found himself in trouble with the law. But through veterans treatment court, Tim completely turned his life around, getting treatment and the services he earned through the Department of Veterans Affairs, while adhering to strict accountability structure.

Today, Tim is again a loving husband and father. He is a certified peer specialist who works full-time as a veteran mentor in the Philadelphia Veterans Treatment Court, helping fellow veterans through the very program that saved his life. The governor of Pennsylvania recently pardoned Tim for his past charges, giving him a free and clear future.

Stories like those of Travis and Tim are not unique in drug courts and veterans treatment courts. These programs are coming to the aid of thousands each year facing incarceration for crimes with the highest levels of recidivism, crimes ranging from forgery and theft to fraud and driving while impaired. By placing individuals in drug court, we are cutting off the cycle of repeat crime and saving taxpayers millions.

As the nation searches for ways out of the opioid crisis and greater addiction epidemic, drug courts and veterans treatment courts can be one solution. These programs are on the front lines of ensuring we have an effective, evidence-based response that saves lives, reunites families, and makes our communities safer.

Treatment courts nationwide have benefited, and continue to benefit, greatly from federal funding provided by the Department of Justice. I encourage this committee to focus on proven programs such as these which guarantee financial returns and measurable success. There is no better example than drug courts and other treatment courts.