COORDINATING CARE FOR DRUG COURT PARTICIPANTS: A CASE STUDY OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN A DISTRICT COURT AND COMMUNITY HOSPITAL

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INTRODUCTION

Given the prevalence of substance use disorder (SUD) among adults in the criminal justice system and the comparatively high arrest rate for individuals with SUD, drug courts have emerged as an alternative approach for cases in which the root cause of criminal behavior is SUD. Reflecting growing acceptance that SUD is most effectively handled as a health problem, drug courts combine judicial supervision and mandated substance abuse treatment with the aim of reducing recidivism and improving treatment retention.1

Drug courts are increasingly recognized as a means to improve engagement in treatment, ultimately promoting both public health and public safety. While drug courts are administered within the judicial system, they rely on effective treatment, necessitating the involvement of healthcare providers. This case study examines the collaboration between a Massachusetts District Drug Court and a community hospital to understand how they collaborate to advance patient-centered care and evidence-based treatment.

FINDINGS

The collaborative nature of the drug court helps staff on both sides of the partnership. Cases are jointly reviewed by the judge, probation officer, and treating clinicians, among other interested stakeholders. The multidisciplinary approach to care requires shared clinical information about each case to create an individualized plan. The information is reviewed by all members of the team, and the judge makes final decisions, but he values the clinicians’ opinions of all staff and relies on the clinicians’ medical expertise. Ultimately, the judge makes final decisions, but he values the clinicians’ opinions of all staff and relies on the clinicians’ medical expertise.

The team members involved in the drug court are the judge, probation officer, and two clinicians, who are responsible for care coordination and treatment engagement, as well as the participants themselves. The team meets biweekly to discuss each participant’s progress, and the judge plays a role in determining treatment interventions. The team meets biweekly to discuss each participant’s progress, and the judge plays a role in determining treatment interventions.

The team’s success is supported by the drug court’s ability to provide ongoing treatment and support, as well as by the participants’ commitment to treatment. The team recognizes that the participants’ commitment to treatment is a key factor in their success.

The collaboration between the hospital and the drug court is crucial to the success of the program. The drug court staff provide ongoing treatment and support, while the hospital provides medical and mental health services. The collaboration between the hospital and the drug court is crucial to the success of the program. The drug court staff provide ongoing treatment and support, while the hospital provides medical and mental health services.

In-person, semi-structured interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis with the Massachusetts Director of Specialty Courts, the Judge, the Chief Probation Officer, a Probation Officer, and two clinicians at the community hospital who provide clinical assessment and treatment for drug court participants. In-person, semi-structured interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis with the Massachusetts Director of Specialty Courts, the Judge, the Chief Probation Officer, a Probation Officer, and two clinicians at the community hospital who provide clinical assessment and treatment for drug court participants.

In addition, several drug court sessions and case review meetings were observed. Interview transcripts were coded for emergent themes grouped in four categories: participant relationships, impact, and challenges. The team has found that by sharing information, the participants feel more supported and motivated to continue treatment.

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IMPLICATIONS

• Community hospitals and drug courts can successfully collaborate to leverage resources from both the health and judicial systems to better meet the needs of patients with SUD.

• When building collaborative relationships, open communication is key. All staff should be familiar with the resources available to patients, and the array of services available to them.

• Cautiously funded, judicial and health systems resource allocation remains a challenge.

• Increased reimbursement for behavioral health services is needed. It may improve availability of these resources, and thereby make better drug courts possible to link patients to needed services.

• Because probationary periods are inherently time limited, without the support and accountability of the program, patients exiting the drug court program may struggle with recovery. More research is needed to better understand drug court participants’ needs after exiting the drug court program.

LIMITATIONS

• In-person, semi-structured interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis with the Massachusetts Director of Specialty Courts, the Judge, the Chief Probation Officer, a Probation Officer, and two clinicians at the community hospital who provide clinical assessment and treatment for drug court participants.

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STUDY DESIGN

In-person, semi-structured interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis with the Massachusetts Director of Specialty Courts, the Judge, the Chief Probation Officer, a Probation Officer, and two clinicians at the community hospital who provide clinical assessment and treatment for drug court participants. In-person, semi-structured interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis with the Massachusetts Director of Specialty Courts, the Judge, the Chief Probation Officer, a Probation Officer, and two clinicians at the community hospital who provide clinical assessment and treatment for drug court participants.

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1. The model focuses on addressing root causes underlying criminal behavior is SUD.

2. This drug court program, located in rural Massachusetts, collaborates closely with a nearby community hospital that provides the majority of care in the region.

3. The collaboration between the hospital and the drug court is crucial to the success of the program. The drug court staff provide ongoing treatment and support, while the hospital provides medical and mental health services. The collaboration between the hospital and the drug court is crucial to the success of the program. The drug court staff provide ongoing treatment and support, while the hospital provides medical and mental health services.

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