

Mental Health Court Learning Sites



In 1997 there were four known mental health courts in the country. By January 2004 the number of mental health courts had grown to 70 in 29 states. As of March 2006, there were over 120 known courts in 35 states.¹

The number of mental health courts in the U.S. has grown exponentially over the past decade. State and local officials considering whether to establish mental health courts in their jurisdictions, as well as those who have recently launched mental health courts, often seek out more experienced mental health courts for guidance and advice.

To facilitate peer-to-peer assistance among mental health courts, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)—through its technical assistance provider, the Council of State Governments (CSG)—has designated five mental health courts as “learning sites.” Located across the country, these learning sites represent a diverse cross-section of perspectives and court models:

- Akron Municipal Mental Health Court (Akron, Ohio)
- Bonneville County Mental Health Court (Idaho Falls, Idaho)
- Bronx County Mental Health Court (New York, New York)
- Dougherty Superior Court Mental Health Substance Abuse Division (Albany, Georgia)
- Washoe County Multi-jurisdictional Mental Health Court (Reno, Nevada)

The Mental Health Court Learning Sites are part of the technical assistance offered by BJA's Mental Health Courts Program. Information about the MHCP and mental health courts generally can be found on the MHCP Web site at: <http://consensusproject.org/mhcp/>.

This document was prepared by the Council of State Governments under grant number 2003DDBXK007, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

To learn more about the mental health court learning sites, and how they might be of assistance to you, visit <http://consensusproject.org/mhcp>.

For more info about MHCs and technical assistance, contact Denise Tomasini, Council of State Governments, (212) 482-2320 / dtomasini@csg.org.

Why learning sites?

Mental health courts are a promising strategy for communities seeking to improve the response to people with mental illness in the justice system. Despite their promise, no definitive studies have been completed of any court programs to confirm their impact (although several studies are underway). Without such empirical evidence, mental health courts generally, or any of the five

learning sites specifically, cannot be considered “models.” But, as the mental health court concept spreads rapidly across the country, learning sites will play key roles: they will provide other jurisdictions with opportunities to observe operating and sustainable mental health courts, and showcase strategies for solving problems that mental health courts typically confront.

What are learning sites' responsibilities?

- **Attend meetings and conferences** — Learning sites will participate in a forum where they will help design the procedures for hosting visiting sites, learn what makes a good “host site” from expert consultants, and work on improving their court materials for sharing with visiting sites and the field.
- **Host site visits** — Learning sites will host teams from jurisdictions planning or implementing an MHC.
- **Maintain a commitment to self-improvement** — Through their willingness to identify shortcomings in their own courts—and develop and pursue efforts to improve them—the learning sites will demonstrate that mental health courts remain works in progress. Expert consultants will assist the learning sites in highlighting areas for improvement and recommend steps to address these aspects of their court programs.

How were learning sites identified?

BJA, through CSG and in collaboration with expert consultants, considered a number of criteria when selecting learning sites, including:

- **Longevity** — Learning sites have operated for more than two years, and demonstrate long-term sustainability.
- **Geographical diversity** — Learning sites represent four regions of the U.S.—Northeast, South, West, and Midwest—and both urban and rural jurisdictions.
- **Fidelity with the *Essential Elements of a Mental Health Court*²** — Learning sites show some *prima facie* fidelity to the *Essential Elements of a Mental Health Court* and specific expertise in an *Essential Elements* issue area.
- **Ability to host jurisdictions** — Learning sites demonstrate an interest in providing guidance to other courts and a willingness to devote time to provide this guidance.
- **Criminal justice/mental health collaboration** — Learning sites function as part of a continuum of strategies in their jurisdictions to improve the response to justice-involved people with mental illness.

1. This estimate was determined by cross-referencing the National Survey of Mental Health Courts (www.mentalhealthcourtsurvey.com), maintained by the Council of State Governments (CSG), the National GAINS Center, and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) with surveys submitted by MHCs for CSG's *Mental Health Courts and Beyond* conference, held in June 2005.

2. The latest draft of the *Essential Elements of a Mental Health Court* is available at <http://consensusproject.org/mhcp>. The *Elements* were culled from a variety of sources, including interviews with BJA MHCP grantees, on-site visits to grantee and non-grantee mental health courts, an interactive web forum, and a review of scholarly literature.