

# NATIONAL DRUG COURT INSTITUTE



## DRUG COURT PRACTITIONER FACT SHEET

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### Effective Drug Court Program Evaluations

Drug courts have made great progress in the area of program evaluation and the majority of drug courts have a monitoring and/or evaluation component. Specifically, evaluations are instrumental in assisting drug courts to determine what works and what doesn't work. Further, evaluation results are reported to policy makers and funders who use the evaluation results to determine whether to continue their support of drug court programs. Individual programs and ultimately, the drug court movement, are dependent on quality program evaluations for their survival.

NDCI has received numerous requests for assistance in the area of drug court evaluation, as well as requests for evaluation standards. NDCI is still in the process of developing standards, including a glossary of evaluation definitions. In the mean time, NDCI presents some brief tips for conducting drug court evaluations, in part based on existing literature:

- Ensure that the evaluation answers all the questions of the stakeholders.
- Provide a comprehensive description of the drug court program, including the date the program began, policies and procedures, and a description of how drug offenders were previously processed through the criminal justice system. This description should also include any major changes in the program during the evaluation period.
- Clearly define the goals and objectives of evaluation and ensure that goals and objectives are measurable.

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- Plan both process and outcome evaluations as the program is being planned. Process evaluations can contribute to early program improvements. Data for outcome evaluations should be collected at the beginning of the program to provide baseline data.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive data collection plan specifying the definitions for each data element (e.g. participant, dropout, success, termination, completion, treatment and ancillary services, retention, recidivism, relapse), identifying limitations to the data definition, identifying the source of the data, identifying the frequency of collecting the data, developing a common identifier system and ensuring that informed consent is in place.
- Include comprehensive data for drug court participants, including: demographic, economic and social status characteristics, drug use and treatment histories, criminal histories, as well as the status of their physical and mental health (Peters 1996).
- Include outcome data for all program participants, not only graduates. Reporting on graduates only (successful participants) magnifies the success of drug court programs. Reporting outcomes for all participants provides a more accurate portrayal of the drug court program's success (Belenko 1999).
- Specify time periods and dates for data collection and evaluation. This is especially important for post program analysis, e.g. recidivism (Belenko 1999).

- It is critical for drug court evaluations to report data for participants while they are in the program separately from post program data. This is important because drug courts have demonstrated that they are significantly more successful with community supervision than traditional treatment programs while participants are in the program.
- To calculate retention rates, the preferred method is “to choose a cohort of participants who have entered the drug court over a certain period, say 6 months or one year, and follow them for a sufficient time by which all will have either graduated or been terminated” (Belenko, 1999).
- Track participants for multiple years as well as collect multiple outcome measures. Further, collect multiple measures for individual outcomes; for example collect rearrest data and reconviction data to determine recidivism rates (Belenko 1999).
- Collect data elements for follow-up at least six months after participants exit a drug court program. Data elements should include: criminal behavior/activity, days spent in custody on all offenses from date of acceptance into the program; AOD use since leaving the program; changes in job skills and employment status; changes in literacy and other educational attainments; changes in physical and mental health; changes in status of family relationships; attitudes and perceptions of participation in the program; and use of health care and other social services (DCPO, 1997).
- Select an appropriate comparison group. A comparison group of dropouts or rejects can be problematic as they may differ in level of motivation for treatment, involvement with drugs, criminal background and/or other problems (Belenko, 1999).
- Use evaluation outcomes to enhance and modify the program, leverage funding and garner support from policy makers, the community and the media (NDCI, 1999).
- Consider cost benefit analyses, including documentation of: reductions in court costs (judicial, counsel, investigative resources); reductions in costs related to law enforcement and corrections; reductions in the use of health care; and increases in economic productivity (DCPO, 1997).

## References

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Peters, R. (1996). *Evaluating drug court programs: An overview of issues and alternative strategies*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

## Resources/Contacts

- **National Drug Court Institute**  
[www.ndci.org](http://www.ndci.org)
- **American University Drug Court Clearinghouse & Technical Assistance Project**  
<http://www.american.edu/justice/>
- **Bureau of Justice Assistance**  
[www.bjaevaluationwebsite.org](http://www.bjaevaluationwebsite.org)

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