

Drug Court

For more than a decade, juvenile courts in throughout the country have engaged in various evidence based court improvement efforts. One such effort is the development of Juvenile Dependency Drug Courts.

While Los Angeles has been successful in reducing the number of children under court supervision from over 50,000 to approximately 26,000 today, there remains a core of cases where substance abuse is either the presenting problem or is a contributing factor to issues of domestic violence, physical abuse and/or neglect in a majority of cases brought before the court.

With the support of grants from the AOC, the Los Angeles Juvenile Court has partnered with the County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and local drug treatment providers to initiate a dependency drug court protocol. While this protocol mirrors in many respects adult drug courts, there are significant differences. One major difference is that failure to comply with the drug court program does not carry the potential sanction of incarceration, as in adult court. In juvenile court, participation is voluntary. However, the parents do run the risk of having reunification services terminated and the child referred for a permanent plan if the parents do not comply.

In Los Angeles County, this program began in May of 2006 as a pilot project in one of the twenty Los Angeles Dependency Courts. Just as adult drug courts have demonstrated their effectiveness through research and evaluation, so too did the pilot court demonstrate excellent results. After 5 years the recidivism rate for relapse was under 10%.

Therefore, approximately eighteen months later, the program was expanded to four additional courts.

Each court is tied to a separate region of the county serviced by DCFS. The courts use the team approach: consisting of specially selected social workers who devote their full time to the drug court clients; a localized drug abuse program provider; attorneys for parents and children who volunteered to participate; and the Judicial Officer (Judge, Commissioner or Referee). As DCFS makes initial contact with the family, the agency is to make an initial assessment of the presenting issues and if it is determined that substance abuse is a primary factor, the family is referred to a Team Decision Making meeting (TDM), usually within two or three days of the initial contact. At that meeting, the family, social workers, drug counseling providers and any other family members or friends participate. The option of participating in drug court is explained to the parents and they are given the option of participating. The drug program provider then does an assessment and makes a recommendation for the appropriate level of services, i.e., in-patient or out-patient services.

The courts hold drug court hearings approximately every two weeks. At any one time, each drug court services approximately 20 parents, based upon funding. Prior to the scheduled hearings, the team meets to discuss each parent's participation and compliance. The team discusses any adjustments or modifications to the case plan. The hearings are then held in an informal manner where each parent participates with the support of the other parents participating in the program. The program lasts for a year, as the parents' progress from the most intensive service to maintenance.

Each of the courts participating in the program report reunification rates of between 75 to 80%, higher than in its general case load.

It is the hope that eventually all Dependency Courts in Los Angeles will include a drug court component.