

Sample OpEd

Treatment Courts Save Lives and Money: Now We Need to Save Them

This May, drug courts and other treatment courts throughout [state] will join nearly 3,200 such courts nationwide in celebrating National Drug Court Month. By May 31, thousands of individuals who entered the justice system addicted to drugs and facing incarceration will receive life-saving treatment and the chance to repair their lives, reconnect with their loved ones, and become productive members of society. As the opioid epidemic ravages our communities, treatment courts have become a crucial strategy for confronting this devastation and saving lives and families. These courts reduce substance use, crime, and recidivism, all while saving money for taxpayers. But now, they face a critical moment in which they are at risk of losing funding.

As the new presidential administration and 115th Congress determine their priorities and how to fund them, we must ensure that life-saving treatment courts are not left behind. Not only have they paved the way for significant criminal justice reform since their inception in the late 1980s, but in a time of great division, they are one of the few initiatives that people from both sides of the aisle believe in.

Treatment courts prove that a combination of accountability and compassion can not only save lives, but save valuable resources by reducing exorbitant criminal justice costs. Today, the innovative, evidence-based treatment these programs provide has led more than 1.5 million Americans into long-term recovery. The expansion of the adult drug court model into other types of treatment courts that serve families, veterans, juveniles, and repeat driving while impaired (DWI) offenders is transforming how the justice system responds to addiction and mental health and proving that treatment is far more effective than punishment.

In [year], the first treatment court in [state] opened its doors with a simple premise: rather than continue to allow individuals with long histories of drug abuse and crime to cycle through the justice system at great expense to the public, use the leverage of the court to keep them engaged in treatment long enough to be successful.

More research has been published on the effectiveness of treatment courts than virtually all other criminal justice programs combined. In 2012, the US Government Accountability Office submitted a report to Congress confirming these court programs reduce substance use and crime, all while saving money. In fact, they reduce crime by up to 50% and prevent recidivism for as long as 14 years. Nationally, they return to the community up to \$27 for every \$1 invested, since their approach not only diverts individuals from a life of substance use and crime, but reduces the use of jail and prison beds, emergency room admissions, family conflicts associated with domestic violence and child abuse, the number of babies born with neonatal abstinence syndrome, and the number of placements in our overburdened foster care system.

These programs keep [state]’s roads safe from impaired drivers, intervene before our youth embark on a debilitating life of substance use and crime, give parents the tools they need to stay sober and maintain custody of their children, and ensure our veterans receive the benefits and treatment they have earned. For all these reasons and more, they must remain a funding priority for our country and its leaders.