
DOUGHERTY COUNTY, GEORGIA MENTAL HEALTH COURT

Approximately 50–75 participants per year
Established in 2002



NOTABLE FEATURES

- A rural jurisdiction that offers a competency restoration docket—a process that helps people with mental health issues stand trial
- Works closely with the state Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities on competency and restoration
- Provides training to court professionals across the country and works with behavioral health partners to provide crisis intervention team (CIT) training to other jurisdictions
- Conducts ongoing data collection and formal evaluations

MENTAL HEALTH COURT TEAM

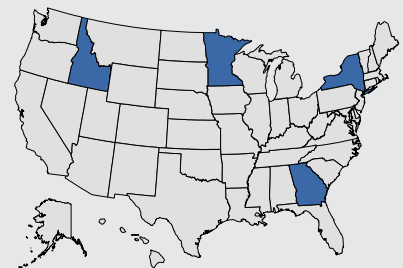
The court team is led by Judge Stephen Goss, and includes a court coordinator, two probation officers, a clinician, two caseworkers (specializing in mental health and substance use, respectively), two public defenders, and two district attorneys. Caseworkers from the county’s assertive community treatment (ACT) team, and from the Albany Advocacy Resource Center (ARC)—an organization in Albany, Georgia, that advocates on behalf of people with disabilities and provides individualized services—also work with the judge and his court team.

MENTAL HEALTH COURT LEARNING SITES

A mental health court (MHC) is a court-based program that brings together members of criminal justice and behavioral health systems, among others, to work with people with mental illnesses who face criminal charges. MHCs modify traditional court processes to start participants on a therapeutically oriented path of court supervision and behavioral health treatment. MHC teams generally hold meetings prior to each court convening, with participant referrals coming from district attorneys, defense attorneys, judges, community supervision, other court partners and jail staff, as well as family or community members.

The number of MHCs in the U.S. has grown exponentially in the past two decades. State and local officials who have recently launched, or are considering whether to launch, such programs in their jurisdictions often seek out more experienced MHCs for guidance and advice.

To facilitate peer-to-peer assistance among jurisdictions that have established or are planning to establish MHCs, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), through its technical assistance provider, The Council of State Governments Justice Center, has designated four jurisdictions as MHC “learning sites.” Located across the country, these MHC Learning Sites represent a diverse cross-section of perspectives and program examples. MHC Learning Sites host in-person visits to their courts and respond to telephone and email inquiries from the field.



WHOM DOES THIS MENTAL HEALTH COURT SERVE?

People charged with nonviolent felonies who have mental illnesses, co-occurring substance use disorders, or primary substance use disorders are eligible for the Dougherty County MHC. The majority of participants enter the court after violating the terms of their probation.

The program has four participant tracks to address its large target population: (1) participants with mental illnesses; (2) participants with co-occurring substance use disorders; (3) participants with substance use disorders; and (4) participants who are returning to the community upon release from prison or jail.

The fourth track—the reentry track—is the only one that accepts people who have been charged with violent offenses. In general, people charged with crimes against children and sex offenses, as well as those with histories of violence, are not eligible to participate. People with developmental disabilities or organic brain injuries as a primary diagnosis are also not eligible.

HOW DOES THIS MENTAL HEALTH COURT WORK?

The minimum period of participation is 18 months. There are three phases of the court program:

- **Phase 1** lasts approximately 6 months and includes Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT) groups, clinical and medical appointments, random drug screens, and attendance at 12-step meetings.
- **Phase 2** lasts between 4 and 6 months and includes substance use disorder group therapy or peer support groups provided by the local community services board, clinical appointments, random drug screens, and 12-step meeting attendance.
- **Phase 3** is a six-month period intended to transition participants into graduation from the program.

FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Dougherty County provides in-kind contributions of physical space as well as sheriff staff and state probation officers, who help to coordinate the MHC. The Community Service Board provides treatment and counseling with state funding. Dougherty County’s MHC judge is active in training and outreach with numerous state agencies. To maximize resources and impact, court staff meet with stakeholders and work with advocates such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness to facilitate CIT training within the community.

HOW TO LEARN FROM THIS SITE

The Dougherty County MHC hosts site visits and answers questions about its operation and best practices via phone and email.

To learn more, contact:

Patricia Griffin

Program Coordinator

229-878-3183

patricia.e.griffin@gmail.com

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Mental Health Court Learning Sites are a part of the technical assistance offered by BJA’s Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Program. Information about Mental Health Court Learning Sites can be found at csgjusticecenter.org/mental-health/learning-sites. To download the following other mental health court resources, please visit csgjusticecenter.org/mental-health-court-project:

A Guide to Collecting Mental Health Court Outcome Data
Mental Health Courts: A Guide to Research-Informed Policy and Practice
State Standards: Building Better Mental Health Courts
Improving Responses to People with Mental Illnesses: The Essential Elements of a Mental Health Court

Improving Responses to People with Mental Illnesses at the Pretrial Stage: Essential Elements
Developing a Mental Health Court: An Interdisciplinary Curriculum
Developing a Mental Health Court: An Interdisciplinary Curriculum; Handbook for Facilitators