

Program Coordinators' Perspective

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There is usually one person assigned to be the “program coordinator” for a mental health court. A coordinator’s responsibilities generally include everything from logistics for team meetings and keeping participant information current to fundraising and other public relations to serving as an intermediary brokering an acceptable outcome among the different personalities and interests on the team. The person filling this role may come from a background as a clinician, an attorney, a social worker, a court employee, a community corrections officer, or any of a number of professional backgrounds. S/he may be employed by the courts, by a local behavioral health care provider or authority, or by the local community corrections agency, or may be hired as a consultant specifically for the mental health court project.

Here two mental health court program coordinators from different programs share some of their experiences:

What sorts of challenges might a new program coordinator expect to encounter?

“You need a lot of patience to work with the different personalities in this position as well as patience to work with the challenging client population. Most programs are understaffed so you have to learn ways to make do with fewer resources without diluting the integrity of your program. This means you don’t always have access to some of the treatment services you need (for us that’s residential Alcohol/Drug treatment), so you have to be able to discern who will most benefit from your program.”

“I would say one of the biggest challenges for the team as a whole has been defining roles. Specifically who should be the good cop vs. bad cop. We have on more than one occasion had to discuss our roles and what the expectations of everyone should be. Sometimes the judges actually need to be reminded of roles. When we are ready to kick a client out of our court the mental health staff on our team will always say they are willing to continue to work with the client. . . . This doesn’t mean we haven’t already exhausted all our resources and plans for the individual.”

“Confidentiality [is an important issue for coordinators to consider]. You need to ensure that you address this issue with all team members and community partners. The justice system primarily works with public information (police reports, etc.), but mental health and alcohol/drug treatment has to comply with HIPAA [the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act] regulations. Establishing policies to ensure that you comply with this is from the beginning is important.”

What advice do you have for new program coordinators or those considering becoming a mental health court program coordinator?

“Something that has been very helpful with our team is that we have monthly policy meetings. These meetings are not to discuss individuals, but rather our team policies and in general how we do business. We also have a yearly retreat where we take a half day to spend as a team. It’s a time to do some team building, make plans for our future and develop new goals for our program.”

“As to data collection I would say save as much information as you can. You never know when it might come in handy. With our court needing to lobby the legislature it has been good to have all kinds of information or be able to figure it out easily. For example this year the judges asked me if I knew what the sentences of those that did not get sent to MHC but had been accepted was. I did have about half this information on hand, so it wasn’t too difficult to gather this up.”

“Just recently I started keeping stats to compare those that graduated to those that did not to see if we can see any trends. This information will be discussed in future staff retreats to do some brain storming. For instance there may be diagnoses or people with certain criminal histories that we are not as successful with. We will be able to discuss what we can do differently in the future with these particular groups.”

“Public relations: it is always good to go around and talk to the judges that refer to our court every year or so. We also go visit the Public Defenders too. One thing that we have not done yet but have discussed is to go around to some of the other service providers in our community to inform them exactly what we do and how they can make referrals. We have our primary treatment provider, but there are a few other places that do assist our clients.”

“I found the state and national conferences for various treatment courts to be the most beneficial in gaining new ideas and resources for our program. It was always rejuvenating meeting with other programs from within your state and around the country to share ideas. I always came back with renewed motivation and inspiration to improve our program. Unfortunately, our state discontinued the state conferences and we cannot afford to attend national ones without special funding, but I am hopeful we will get to attend one again sometime in the future.”