



## **American Council of Chief Defenders (ACCD)**

### **Ten Tenets of Fair and Effective Problem Solving Courts**

#### **Introduction**

*“Problem Solving Courts” are spreading across the country. Though the current wave of interest started with the creation of Miami’s Drug Court in 1989, the nation’s courts had a long prior history of seeking to solve the problems of offenders and communities through the imposition of sentences with rehabilitative conditions or indeterminate sentences with a chance for early release based on rehabilitation. The advent of mandatory minimums and determinate sentencing foreclosed many such options, leading to the establishment of Problem-Solving Courts as a new vehicle for effecting established rehabilitative objectives.*

*There currently are more than 500 drug courts operating, and more than 280 others currently in the planning process, in all 50 states. Although drug courts have existed the longest and been studied the most, “Community Courts,” “Mental Health Courts,” and other specialty courts are beginning to proliferate.*

*Despite Department of Justice and other publications that urge inclusion of defenders in the adjudication partnerships that form to establish “Problem Solving Courts,” the voice of the defense bar has been sporadic at best. Although defense representation is an important part of the operation of such courts, more often than not, defenders are excluded from the policymaking processes which accompany the design, implementation and on-going evaluation and monitoring of Problem Solving Courts. As a result, an important voice for fairness and a significant treatment resource are lost.*

*The following guidelines have been developed to increase both the fairness and the effectiveness of Problem Solving Courts, while addressing concerns regarding the defense role within them. They are based upon the research done in the drug court arena by pretrial services experts and others and the extensive collective expertise that defender chiefs have developed as a result of their experiences with the many different specialty courts across the country. There is not as yet, a single, widely accepted definition of Problem Solving Courts. For the purposes of these guidelines, Problem Solving Courts include courts which are aimed at reducing crime and increasing public safety by providing appropriate, individualized treatment and other resources aimed at addressing long-standing community issues (such as drug addiction, homelessness or mental illness) underlying criminal conduct.*

## The Ten Tenets

1. **Qualified representatives of the indigent defense bar shall have the opportunity to meaningfully participate in the design, implementation and operation of the court, including the determination of participant eligibility and selection of service providers.** Meaningful participation includes reliance on the principles of adjudication partnerships that operate pursuant to a consensus approach in the decision-making and planning processes. The composition of the group should be balanced so that all functions have the same number of representatives at the table. Meaningful participation includes input into any on-going monitoring or evaluation process that is established to review and evaluate court functioning.
2. **Qualified representatives of the indigent defense bar shall have the opportunity to meaningfully participate in developing policies and procedures for the problem-solving court that ensure confidentiality and address privacy concerns,** including (but not limited to) record-keeping, access to information and expungement.
3. **Problem solving courts should afford resource parity between the prosecution and the defense.** All criminal justice entities involved in the court must work to ensure that defenders have equal access to grant or other resources for training and staff.
4. **The accused individual's decision to enter a problem solving court must be voluntary.** Voluntary participation is consistent with an individual's pre-adjudication status as well as the rehabilitative objectives.
5. **The accused individual shall not be required to plead guilty in order to enter a problem solving court.** This is consistent with diversion standards adopted by the National Association of Pretrial Services Agencies. See Pretrial Diversion Standard 3.3 at 15 (1995). The standards stress, "requiring a defendant to enter a guilty plea prior to entering a diversion program does not have therapeutic value." Id.
6. **The accused individual shall have the right to review with counsel the program requirements and possible outcomes. Counsel shall have a reasonable amount of time to investigate cases before advising clients regarding their election to enter a problem solving court.**
7. **The accused individual shall be able to voluntarily withdraw from a problem solving court at any time without prejudice to his or her trial rights.** This is consistent with the standards adopted by the National Association of Pretrial Services Agencies. See Pretrial Diversion Standard 6.1 at 30 (1995).

- 8. The court, prosecutor, legislature or other appropriate entity shall implement a policy that protects the accused's privilege against self-incrimination.**
- 9. Treatment or other program requirements should be the least restrictive possible to achieve agreed-upon goals. Upon successful completion of the program, charges shall be dismissed with prejudice and the accused shall have his or her record expunged in compliance with state law or agreed upon policies.**
- 10. Nothing in the problem solving court policies or procedures should compromise counsel's ethical responsibility to zealously advocate for his or her client, including the right to discovery, to challenge evidence or findings and the right to recommend alternative treatments or sanctions.**