

Developing a Mental Health Court: An Interdisciplinary Curriculum

Methodology

Developing a Mental Health Court benefits from many contributors. This section provides background on how the curriculum was developed—from the ongoing role of a project Steering Committee, to the engagement of practitioners, to extensive testing in the field, to the development of a comprehensive strategy for getting the curriculum into the hands of those who need it.

The Council of State Governments Justice Center (CSG Justice Center) has provided training and technical assistance to mental health courts for Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) grantees, among others, for over a decade and has authored numerous key documents for policymakers and practitioners (*Improving Responses to People with Mental Illnesses: The Essential Elements of a Mental Health Court*; *A Guide to Mental Health Court Design and Implementation*; *Mental Health Courts: A Guide to Research-Informed Policy and Practice*; and others). Working closely with policy advisors at BJA, CSG Justice Center staff developed goals for the project, engaged advisors, and drafted the curriculum's materials. The Center for Social Innovation (C4), which brings together expertise in behavioral health and adult learning, joined the project early to advise on learning theory and to translate content into vivid, engaging learning materials.

A Steering Committee of national experts; membership organizations; policymakers; and state and local practitioners from the courts, community corrections, and behavioral health guided the development of the curriculum. In addition to articulating goals and reviewing draft materials, this group was crucial to ensuring that the curriculum builds upon existing resources and meets the needs of diverse users. Steering Committee members also played a key role in identifying and connecting with audiences for the curriculum.

Numerous policymakers, practitioners, and experts have contributed to and reviewed curriculum components. Whether drafting reading materials, commenting on the curriculum's hypothetical "case study," or reviewing drafts, these individuals ensured that this final product truly reflects the state of the field.

The curriculum and facilitation materials also benefited from several types of field-testing. State-level coordinators in Colorado and Delaware were selected to pilot use of the curriculum with new and existing teams, as were local teams working in Jefferson County (WA) and Polk County (IA). These pilot sites featured urban, rural, and suburban geographies and jurisdictions with varying degrees of experience with problem-solving courts and criminal justice/mental health collaboration. All pilot sites provided detailed feedback and completed evaluations to assess their teams' acquisition of knowledge and skills.

In addition, a group of state problem-solving court coordinators/judicial educators was convened to discuss how state-level trainers could use the curriculum in local jurisdictions and to share their experiences and advice on fa-

cilitating interdisciplinary teams. These coordinators represented states of varied sizes, regions of the country, and degrees of experience with state-level training on these issues (CO, DE, ID, IL, UT, VA, WV).

Altogether, the curriculum features input from individuals representing over 20 states. [To view the Acknowledgments, click here.](#)

Principles of Adult Learning in Developing a Mental Health Court

Developing a Mental Health Court is designed to reflect the understanding that effective adult learning experiences are interactive and based in relevant experiences and situations. The “community of practice” concept attributed to Etienne Wenger has informed the development of this curriculum. In communities of practice, “groups of people . . . share a concern, a set of problems, a passion about a topic, and . . . deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”* Communities of practice have been found to be effective in translating research to practice in numerous settings. Learners will meet members of the mental health court community of practice throughout the curriculum. These interviews, role plays, and program descriptions facilitate collaborative learning at both the individual level, as learners identify individuals throughout the country from their own professions, and at the team level, as mental health court teams jointly reflect on program design, implementation, and operation by reviewing the experiences of other teams.

The curriculum’s structure, which is a hybrid between online modules and live activities, also provides numerous bridges from the online materials to local, state, and national people and programs that users may wish to contact to continue their learning. This “blended learning” approach makes national expertise accessible through videotaped interviews while providing opportunities for reflection and discussion among team members. Materials for facilitators, whether they are state trainers or local team members, provide guidance on how these individuals can use the online and live components of the curriculum to help users engage with the content.

*Snyder, William C., Etienne Wenger, and Richard McDermott. *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.