

Sherry Boston:

All of our graduates are together examples of success in the sense that we are effectuating meaningful change in defendant's behavioral health that really go beyond punitive or criminal justice, restorative justice approaches. For us, it's about changing people's lives because we know that if we change their lives and help them become stable, that they will exit the criminal justice system and likely never reenter it again. Positive impacts that we've seen when offering mental health court or wellness court outside of incarceration is really reunification of families. In many of these cases, you have family members that have hoped and desired for their family member to get the help they so desperately needed. And many times these family members are calling the police, are engaging with the criminal justice system because they need that immediate help, but it's not where they want to see their family member go.

It's not the system they want to be a part of, but they see it as an immediate resource to attack that problem right there. And so what these courts can do is by restoring that person and restoring that connection with family and giving families an opportunity to even heal in this process with behavioral health issues that may lend themselves to be their observations, to be questioned by the other side in the prosecution of a case. And so it's really important as a prosecutor to understand where these behavioral health issues can be a challenge for each and every participant in the system. One of the biggest misconceptions is that people with behavioral health are more likely to commit crimes, especially violent crimes. And that is certainly not the data point out there. There's this stigma or these conclusions that we want to jump to about the people that we see that are experiencing mental health issues, but it doesn't make them criminals.

And second, that people with behavioral health needs who commit crimes can't be rehabilitated. The criminal justice system is not intended, nor is it meant to be a behavioral health provider. I think there's a real misconception that the criminal justice system is supposed to address this issue when in fact what we want is the public health system to address this issue and to help stabilize people so that they don't find themselves ensnared in the criminal justice system. This is a career where you can effectuate meaningful change. This is a place where you can serve the community in a wide variety of ways. You can be a voice for the voiceless for your victims, but you can also be in a place where you can make really powerful decisions about all the actors within the criminal justice system, where you can offer people second opportunities. You can offer people redemption and rehabilitation, and you can offer the community the peace of mind that everything that you're doing is with a lens of equity, fairness, justice in an educated way.