

Oregon

Oregon has 67 specialty courts including Adult Drug, Mental Health, Family, Veterans, Juvenile Drug, and Driving Under the Influence. Over six months of the pandemic, Oregon's Chief Justice's Behavioral Health Advisory Committee created a subcommittee specifically for our specialty court judges. This committee created a much-needed space for judges to connect and share what is and maybe isn't working in their courts. The committee is developing guidelines for mental health courts, creating tools to help courts build and maintain effective and sustainable programs, and establishing yearly training opportunities.

One Oregon Adult Drug Court Judge, Judge Kelly Ravassipour, has found the positive in the pandemic and shared her experience:

If the goal of our participants is a self-directed recovery program, then COVID has proven a pathway for that to occur. Within one week of the courts in Oregon being restricted, we transitioned to WebEx for court. This platform has catapulted our participants in several ways.

One positive of WebEx is participants are more transparent about their lives. Sometimes it is challenging to enter a courtroom, where the previous hearings yielded unpleasant outcomes. For many, going to court meant going to jail. Appearing by video has removed this mental obstacle for our participants. Their ability to navigate the electronic world by using social media to communicate with the court and counselors was a seamless transition. Participants have enjoyed sharing their world with us out of court, and this is a perspective we haven't experienced before. We have visited homes, workplaces, met family members, pets and been in their cars. We have witnessed participants find confidence in themselves in sharing these perspectives with the treatment team. Consequently, these relationships have strengthened. Another positive of WebEx is our participants no longer miss work for court, they don't have to seek transportation or arrange daycare; they just video in.

We knew at the beginning of this pandemic this would be an interesting case study and the conclusion is it has been a success in Southern Oregon. The team asks each person what they intend to do upon graduation without coming to court, having a PO and so forth. What has been fascinating is to witness our participants forge support independently of the program, because the former is not an option. They have discovered support meetings, friendships, and paths of recovery on their terms with us on the sidelines encouraging them along. Mild mannered, introverted participants who are normally shy in our presence have blossomed.

Although this past year has brought many hardships, our recovery court has chosen this as an opportunity to support our participants and treatment providers in a new way. Next week we will be hosting our second graduation in COVID restrictions: there will be viewers on WebEx, callers on the phone and masked graduates six feet apart in the courtroom. What marks this as a remarkable day is the fact that these graduates have taken on addiction, on their own terms and have succeeded. Once we move past this pandemic, there will be positive takeaways to move forward building even stronger foundations for our treatment courts. I personally look forward to those conversations.

Submitted by Judge Kelly Ravassipour