

Delaware

New Castle County (NCC) Delaware initiated a pilot program to better serve those in need of mental health and/or substance use treatment who encounter the court system. The pilot includes several key aspects:

- Connecting defendants to mental health and/or substance use treatment from the earliest point of entry in the court system (at the Justice of the Peace Court) and at all points of interaction within the initial court processes.
- Shortening the timeframe between the defendant's first hearing at the Justice of the Peace Court to when they have an arraignment at the Court of Common Pleas and placing them on a specific court calendar.

A multidisciplinary stakeholder committee is leading the development and continued implementation of the pilot. Agencies represented on the committee include: Judicial Branch, Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health (DSAMH), Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Defense Services (ODS), State Police, New Castle County Police Department (NCCPD), and Delaware Criminal Justice Information System (DELJIS). The work of the committee initially started in connection with goals of the Delaware Behavioral Health Consortium's Law Enforcement and Corrections Subcommittee. The Consortium is led by Lieutenant Governor Bethany Hall-Long and is an advisory body comprised of community advocates, law enforcement, healthcare professionals, and state leaders that have short-term and long-term strategies and initiatives to address the major addiction and mental health challenges in Delaware. The pilot committee focuses on the timeframe after arrest and during the initial court proceedings.

The courts partnered with DSAMH's Bridge Clinic for support. The Bridge Clinic is open to the public and staffed by clinicians and peer specialists. It provides substance use disorder and mental health screenings, referrals to treatment and other services, and connection to psychiatric and medication assisted treatment services. Transportation to and from the clinic can be provided, no appointments are necessary, and all services are available regardless of ability to pay. The Bridge Clinic in NCC is open 24 hours a day, as is the Justice of the Peace Court. If a law enforcement officer or Justice of the Peace Court Judge has indication that a defendant may benefit from treatment services, they can call the Bridge Clinic and get the person connected. Regardless of if the defendant says yes to connection at the Bridge Clinic, they are placed on a specific "fast track" court calendar at the Court of Common Pleas, where they are again offered connection to treatment through a peer specialist from the Bridge Clinic who is on site in the courtroom. Before the pilot it took an average of 60-90 (or more) days for a defendant to move from the Justice of the Peace Court to the Court of Common Pleas. With the collaborative efforts of both courts and the support of DELJIS, that has significantly reduced the "fast track" to 2-3 weeks. This means that defendants who may have an underlying substance use or mental health disorder are not only being offered treatment at each encounter with the court, but are also moving through the court system faster. This also means that, if appropriate, they can be offered treatment court programming, such as drug court or diversion, sooner.

While the pilot is in its initial phases and data is just starting to be tracked, we know that defendants are being offered connections to the Bridge Clinic and moving through the system faster. The next phases of the pilot include involving more law enforcement agencies and expanding to the other counties in the state.