

Breaking the Cycle: Specialty Dockets

An Interview with Dr. Margaret Baughman-Sladky

Your work primarily involves specialty dockets. What are specialty dockets?

Specialty dockets or problem-solving courts are dedicated court probation supervision programs that provide specialized services for court defendants who have a criminal justice charge related to a 'problem' the defendant has that is related to their current criminal justice charge. This could be a substance use disorder, mental health condition, gambling disorder, etc...but instead of the court imposing traditional outcomes (i.e.; probation or incarceration) a court supervision program is provided which focuses on the treating the condition that is associated with the criminal justice charge. The goal is to meet the needs of the defendant and therefore breaking the cycle of returning to the criminal justice system.

Problem-solving court programming includes intensive probation monitoring, frequent court hearings to meet with the judge to discuss case progress, treatment linkages for substance use, mental health, employment, GED/Job training, housing and other ancillary services in the community, urinalysis and a system of rewards and sanctions based on the defendants' compliance to the court team treatment plan.

Which specialty dockets do you work with, and what does your work with them entail?

The problem-solving courts I work with are primarily located in Cuyahoga and Marion Counties, and include Municipal (misdemeanor convictions) and Common Pleas (felony convictions) courts. The courts include drug court, mental health court, Veteran court, human trafficking court, and a co-occurring court (substance use + trauma).

The evaluation is conducted confidentially in parallel with the court team; meaning we 'follow' 150-180 court defendants throughout their court supervision program and conduct 3 confidential interviews during this time. The interview cycles are when a defendant enters the court program, 6-months later and when the defendant's supervision is completed (successful case closure or termination from supervision). The evaluation research is an embedded approach which means the evaluation team attends the court team meetings, court hearings, visits treatment centers and jails. In addition to the defendant interviews, the evaluation team collects urine data, treatment data, reward and sanction data and recidivism data on these defendants. Funding for these court programs and evaluation research is from Substance Abuse Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA) and/or Bureau of Justice Affairs (BJA) and these awards are for 2-3 years.

What are some interesting findings from your work?

One interesting finding is that about 30% of defendants with an opioid use disorder when offered medication assisted treatment (MAT) decline the MAT. And those who do engage in a MAT are not utilizing the MAT for long periods of time (typically less than 6 months) which is less time than anticipated by the teams. This was unexpected since many court teams felt that all defendants would have engaged in a MAT and for longer periods of time if they if it was accessible and funding was provided. One factor that may be related to these findings is the availability of the various MATs (Buprenorphine, Methadone and Naltrexone (oral/injectable) is limited for the courts which may be contributing to the lower rates of engagement and length of time of use.

You recently received a new grant award. Tell us about it.

In October 2016, I received a 5-year BJA Smart Supervision grant which will examine the effect of a new crisis intervention for defendants who are under supervision in the Cuyahoga County Common Pleas mental health docket. This Smart Supervision grant award is one of only seven funded in the nation and for the first time allow for recidivism research to be conducted for 2 years after the intervention funding ends to study the program effect on recidivism. Traditionally, federal evaluation research stops when the court programs funding end so the longer term effects such as 'were defendants rearrested/convicted/incarcerated after programming?' cannot be answered since data is no longer being collected on court defendants.