

Merging Reclaiming Futures into Juvenile Drug Courts: Lessons Learned for Implementation

Overview

As jurisdictions throughout the country continue to seek solutions to juvenile justice issues, several have merged two existing models to create an innovative approach: Juvenile Drug Courts: Strategies in Practice (JDC: SIP) and Reclaiming Futures (RF). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), in partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, funded an initiative to improve the effectiveness and efficacy of JDCs by integrating the models. Eight sites that received funding under this initiative are included in the National Cross-Site Evaluation of Juvenile Drug Courts and Reclaiming Futures (the JDC/RF National Cross-Site Evaluation). This cross-site evaluation identified key lessons learned and implementation considerations from the evaluation's process component. This information brief highlights recommendations for policymakers and program managers seeking to improve or create a JDC/RF site and may have broader implications for JDCs in general. Policy recommendations are presented for six key areas: judicial participation; interagency collaboration & confidentiality; evidence-based substance abuse treatment; screening, eligibility & admissions; community collaboration; and family engagement.

Implementation Lessons Learned from the JDC/RF National Cross-Site Evaluation

The JDC: SIP and RF models represent two similar but distinct approaches to serving juveniles in the justice system. The JDC: SIP model is based on 16 strategies developed to guide the planning process, operations, and implementation of JDCs, and the RF model is based on six core steps that utilize community integration to improve juvenile justice. When merged together, the JDC strategies and the RF steps create an innovative approach to improving juvenile justice systems for drug-involved youth by serving both youth and families, and ultimately transitioning and reintegrating youth into their communities.

Recommendations in Brief

- Ensure judicial leaders are trained on JDC, RF, strength-based approaches, and substance abuse treatment
- Encourage the judicial leader to assume a leadership role in both the macro- and micro-level programmatic decisions
- Leverage team members' strengths to foster teamwork
- Meet early in the process to determine what information can be shared
- Work across agencies to develop the most efficient data collection and information sharing system, given existing resources
- Leverage resources to select an evidence-based treatment model that effectively serves the population and use the team to continually reassess fit
- Administer a standardized clinical screening tool early in the juvenile justice process
- Begin treatment before formal admission
- Conduct and update a "community resource map" of youth services
- Develop a formal community engagement structure, targeting identified resources
- Reduce procedural/logistical barriers to engaging families

Effectively implementing the JDC/RF approach involves combining aspects of both models into a cohesive program. There is no single way to implement JDC/RF, and each site participating in the JDC/RF National Cross-Site Evaluation tailored their programs based on community needs, program readiness, and available resources. As a result, JDC/RF sites have many commonalities, yet each site is unique.

Policy Recommendations

The JDC/RF National Cross-Site Evaluation identified policy recommendations related to implementation in six key areas: (1) judicial engagement; (2) interagency collaboration & confidentiality; (3) evidence-based substance abuse treatment; (4) screening, eligibility, and program admission; (5) community collaboration; and (6) family engagement. Recommendations originate from qualitative data collected as part of the process evaluation, primarily from site visits, staff interviews, and community resource mapping.

Judicial Engagement

Because JDC/RF operates within a legal framework, judicial engagement is needed to successfully implement the program. The judicial leader must be fully educated on all concepts related to JDC/RF in order to capitalize on each team member's strengths and to function as a leader in the court room and in program planning. To maximize judicial engagement:

- ***Ensure that the judicial leader is trained on JDC/RF, strength-based approaches, and substance abuse treatment.*** The judicial leader maintains ultimate authority over and responsibility for all JDC/RF youth. To ensure that JDC: SIP and RF are integrated and that the essence of JDC/RF fully permeates the team, the leader must be conceptually “bought into” all the core concepts behind JDC/RF, including JDC: SIP, RF, strength-based approaches, and principles of substance abuse treatment. Judicial education and training are particularly important because juvenile court judges usually work in rotation. As a result, a court employing JDC/RF will not have a constant judicial official. Creating a judicial “transition plan,” which includes on-site training and peer-to-peer knowledge transfer, can help streamline transitions and maintain consistent leadership.
- ***Encourage the judicial leader to assume a leadership role in both the macro- and micro-level programmatic decisions.*** Judicial engagement is crucial at the individual (micro) and programmatic (macro) levels, particularly because JDC/RF focuses on community engagement and systems change. While judicial representatives play a vital leadership role at the micro-level when presiding over court, it is also important to ensure that the same judicial representative plays a leadership role in macro-level program planning. This dual role helps conceptually link macro- and micro-level decision-making. In addition, a judicial leader engaged in both aspects of the program can function as a better public advocate for the court within his or her community (see Community Engagement).
- ***Leverage each team member's strength to foster teamwork.*** As the leader, the judicial representative must balance leadership and cooperation, capitalizing on the strengths of each team member while maintaining judicial authority. This balance is particularly important when making decisions regarding individual youths. Judicial leaders should use court staffings to discuss all youths' cases as a team. These staffings allow the leader to consider recommendations from each appropriate entity (for example, incentive/sanction recommendations from probation representatives), fostering collaboration and developing a cooperative plan prior to court.

Interagency Collaboration & Client Confidentiality

Successfully implementing JDC/RF requires courts to strike an appropriate balance between interagency collaboration and client confidentiality. Team members must share information across disciplines for effective service delivery; however, the team must craft a system and foster a culture that respects client confidentiality. To strike a balance:

- ***Meet early in the implementation process to determine what information can be shared, possibly with a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to define the scope of the data sharing.*** As early as possible

during JDC/RF implementation, key representatives from each organization—and particularly treatment and justice staff—should meet to determine the bounds of interagency data sharing. The team should also develop a process/procedure for data sharing, based on client confidentiality and the constraints of their existing systems. Establishing parameters early can help set clear expectations, address barriers, prevent miscommunication, and maximize benefit across disciplines. In addition, selecting a treatment provider that conceptually supports JDC/RF’s team-based approach can help foster an environment that supports data sharing and mutual respect.

- ***Work across agencies to develop the most efficient data collection and information sharing system, given existing resources.*** An electronic data system is the superior collaborative option, offering tremendous value for tracking and sharing client information while ensuring confidentiality. However, many JDCs operate successfully without an integrated electronic system. Because some such systems require significant technological and financial resources as well as long-term planning for implementation, they merit consideration during the pre-implementation phase. If an integrated, electronic data system is not feasible, other options allow sufficient data sharing and confidentiality at lower cost, including shared documents (e.g., Excel files shared through a secure network) or manually assembled data dashboards.

Evidence-Based Substance Abuse Treatment

To successfully implement JDC/RF, sites must select and use an evidence-based substance abuse treatment model. The selection of that model is best done collaboratively, and members of the JDC/RF team should reassess the model throughout the life of the court. To ensure that a model is a good fit:

- ***Leverage available resources to select an evidence-based treatment (EBT) model that effectively serves the population.*** Courts should consult the entire team during the treatment model selection process to ensure that the model fits with the conceptual approach of all entities involved (including the judge, the treatment organization, the probation department, etc.). This decision should occur after the team has determined who will provide treatment, particularly whether treatment will be provided through their JDC/RF program or through a partnering community agency. This sequence of events allows the treatment provider an appropriate role in the selection process and helps merge the organizational philosophies of all partner organizations.
- ***Use the JDC/RF team as a feedback loop to reassess model selection.*** Even with excellent planning, any given treatment model may prove to be a poor fit for any given court, perhaps due to clinical or philosophical inconsistencies. The court team should look to all team members to frequently reassess the model’s ability to meet the clinical needs of the JDC/RF youth. This feedback loop can help ensure consistency between the model and the philosophy governing the judicial leader’s decisions from the bench, particularly as judicial leaders change. In addition, this feedback loop provides an opportunity to ensure that the model is clinically appropriate to the gender, culture, and development of the site’s youth, the composition of which may change over time.

Screening, Eligibility & Admissions

JDC/RF requires a formal process for determining which youth to admit and how to enroll them in court. However, placing the clinical screening tool early within the juvenile justice process and initiating treatment early can help ensure that JDC/RF reaches more youth and that those youth are served in a timely manner. To streamline the JDC/RF admissions process:

- ***Administer a standardized clinical screening tool early in the juvenile justice process.*** Implementing a standardized screener early in the juvenile justice process provides an opportunity for a greater number of youth to be screened for services and expands the pool of potential drug court enrollees. Placing the screener early in the process helps ensure that a jurisdiction responds to youth needs and identifies all youth that could potentially

benefit from JDC/RF. It is ideal to screen all youth as they enter the justice system; however, screening tool placement is contingent on the nature of the jurisdiction's justice system and the relative position of the court within that system. As a result, placement of the clinical screening should be flexible and may change over time, as the court gains visibility and credibility.

- ***Begin treatment before formal admission.*** Because the process of formally enrolling in a juvenile drug court can take weeks or months, allowing youth to begin treatment before formal court admission can provide more timely access to needed treatment. To conduct these expedited treatment admissions, sites must find ways to conduct clinical assessments early in the admissions process, which requires close collaboration between the court and the treatment agency. While this may be unnecessary for courts with rapid admissions processes, this strategy can help ensure that service provision is not hampered by systemic barriers.

Community Collaboration

Because drug courts can only provide so many services internally, community collaboration helps courts provide the full spectrum of services for enrolled youth. In addition, community partners allow courts to fully transition youth from the juvenile justice system into the community, reengaging youth in community services and activities. To maximize community collaboration:

- ***Conduct and update a “community resource map” of the youth services in your community.*** Community resource mapping can help staff identify a community's strengths (e.g., the religious community, vocational opportunities, or mentoring programs) and prepare the team to leverage those resources. Similarly, once the court is engaged with the community, the community resource map can help identify areas where the court can work with community members to build capacity. Staff should update the map frequently to stay abreast of and capitalize on the ever-changing array of community resources and programs.
- ***Develop a formal structure for community engagement that targets identified resources.*** Creating a formal structure for engaging the community and ensuring that community outreach is managed by a member (or members) of the court team can help ensure that community partners know how to engage the court, if and when they want to be involved. A formal process can ensure that potential partners are invited to attend future meetings and asked for concrete contributions (e.g., contributing mentors or providing gym memberships). In addition, outreach staff may also become one of many ambassadors to promote the court within the community. However, each member of the court team can and should promote the court within their own personal and professional networks.

Family Engagement

JDC/RF serves both youth and families, so courts must take steps to ensure family participation. However, the extent to which courts have authority over parents varies greatly by jurisdiction, and some courts are able to require parent participation. The following strategies can help promote family engagement in any jurisdiction:

- ***Reduce the procedural/logistical barriers to engaging families.*** While reasons for engagement or non-engagement vary widely, simply reducing barriers for interested families can help boost family engagement. Drug court participation presents a host of logistical and procedural barriers for parents, and working to reduce those barriers can take many forms; however, nearly all of those strategies require sacrifices from JDC/RF team members. Providing substance abuse treatment at family-friendly times and locations (e.g., evenings, weekends, and in-home services) can help families participate in treatment sessions and support youth attendance. Similarly, family-friendly court times (e.g., evenings after work/school) can make it easier for parents to attend court. While these strategies seem like “low hanging fruit” they require substantial team

“buy in” and planning, as they ask team members to work non-standard hours. Finally, selecting an evidence-based substance abuse treatment model that includes a family component can also help engage parents (see Treatment).

- ***Provide resources specific to parents.*** Providing services specifically for parents creates a straight-forward reason for families to engage with the court, further demonstrating that JDC/RF aims to serve families as well as their children. This strategy can take many forms, including incorporating a “parent partner” or a parent support group within the program. A parent partner can be a parent of a graduate who provides a unique perspective or a dedicated staff person to help parents with engagement barriers that they may not want to address in a public setting (e.g., transportation difficulties). Similarly, a parent support group can offer parents a safe place to discuss their issues together outside of court.
- ***Engage families from the bench.*** Engaging families from the bench provides parents with an intangible but highly valuable resource. In court, the judge has considerable power to encourage parents to be active participants and help them understand the role of the family in JDC/RF. Importantly, this strategy can also demonstrate to youth that the judge and parents form a “united front,” creating a synergistic effect between parental and legal authority. This interaction offers the judge an opportunity to probe the family dynamic and this strategy can be more successful if the judge leverages input from the drug court team during pre-court staffings.

About the National Cross-Site Juvenile Drug Court and Reclaiming Futures Evaluation

The purpose of the National Cross-Site Evaluation of Juvenile Drug Courts and Reclaiming Futures (JDC/RF) is to conduct an independent evaluation of the combined effects of the JDC: SIP and the RF models to identify the factors, elements, and services that perform best with respect to outcomes and cost-effectiveness. The evaluation is led by the University of Arizona, Southwest Institute for Research on Women (SIROW) in partnership with Chestnut Health Systems and Carnevale Associates, LLC. Additional information on the cross-site evaluation, including reports and presentations, can be found at <http://sirow.arizona.edu/substanceabuse> or by contacting Dr. Sally Stevens, Executive Director of SIROW, at (520) 626-9558 or sstevens@email.arizona.edu.

Disclaimer: The development of this policy brief is funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) through an interagency agreement with the Library of Congress-contract number LCFRD11C0007 and is supported by Grant Number 2013-DC-BX-0081 awarded by OJJDP, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed here are the authors and do not necessarily represent the official policies of the Department of Justice or the Library of Congress; nor does mention of trade names, commercial practices, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

Acknowledgements: SIROW and Carnevale Associates, LLC wish to acknowledge the contributions of the evaluation sites and the evaluation partners Chestnut Health Systems (CHS) to this National Cross-Site Evaluation. In addition, we are appreciative of support from the Library of Congress - Federal Research Division, OJJDP, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and the Reclaiming Futures National Program Office.

Suggested Citation: Carnevale Associates, LLC and University of Arizona - Southwest Institute for Research on Women (2015). National Cross-Site Evaluation of Juvenile Drug Courts and Reclaiming Futures: Merging Reclaiming Futures into Juvenile Drug Courts, Lessons Learned for Implementation. The University of Arizona: Tucson, Arizona.