

Community Engagement in Juvenile Drug Court: Lessons Learned

Overview: The Role of Community Engagement in JDC/RF

Community partners play a vital role in the Juvenile Drug Court/Reclaiming Futures (JDC/RF) integrated model, which was created as a combination of two existing models: Juvenile Drug Courts: Strategies in Practice (JDC: SIP) & 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. The National Cross-Site Evaluation of Juvenile Drug Courts and Reclaiming Futures (the JDC/RF National Cross-Site Evaluation) includes eight sites that received funding under this initiative.

This brief offers recommendations for a component of JDC/RF that goes beyond the direct relationship between the court and the youth: community engagement. Community engagement has two components, which are distinct yet related: (1) engaging community members and organizations in JDC/RF program- and system-level planning, and (2) engaging JDC/RF youth in the community. Engagement between JDC/RF programs and the community involves developing and sustaining relationships with active resources (e.g., mentoring or educational programs), which become community resources for JDC youth. In addition, community engagement with JDC/RF programs involves integrating community partners into the JDC/RF team in a policy and planning role. This allows the JDC and community partners to work collaboratively to take a system-wide approach to the JDC's mission. Finally, youth engage with the community by becoming active community participants. Youth engagement is often facilitated by accessing active community-based resources (e.g., the YMCA); but, ultimately, youth engagement refers to youth embracing a place within their own community.

To inform policymakers and program managers that are seeking to improve or create a JDC/RF program, this policy brief highlights challenges to and recommendations for both aspects of community engagement. These

Recommendations in Brief

- **Educate the Team & Community About Community Engagement in JDC/RF**
 - Educate each team member about community engagement and JDC/RF
 - Use each team member as a community ambassador
 - Publicize the JDC/RF program
- **Develop a Formal Structure for Engaging Community Partners**
 - Designate a specific and well-connected individual as the primary community contact
 - Approach potential partners with specific requests or proposals
 - Set the terms of the collaboration early in the teaming process
 - Cultivate mutually beneficial relationships
- **Create and Regularly Update a Community Resource Map**
 - Create a community resource map
 - Update the map regularly
 - Develop a feedback loop to get input from partners, youth, and families
- **Establish Protocols to Successfully Link Youth with Active Resources**
 - Lower barriers to youth engagement
 - Establish formal linkage protocols
 - Identify resources to facilitate active linkages

recommendations may also have broader implications for other JDCs. Policy recommendations for community engagement are summarized in the “Recommendations in Brief” box and described in more detail throughout this brief.

Advantages of Community Engagement

In addition to being a vital component of the JDC/RF model, both aspects of community engagement—the community engaging with JDC/RF programs and youth engaging with the community—provide significant value to JDCs, youth, and families. Taken together, both aspects of community engagement aim to foster positive youth development and community-directed engagement, improving the lives of enrolled youth and the communities in which they live.¹

Engaging the community in JDC/RF programs brings outside perspectives into the court team, helps with problem-solving, and allows the JDC to approach juvenile justice through a truly community-based approach—lending voices to justice and community personnel. Community engagement at this level can also help reduce the stigma associated with juvenile justice by exposing community members to the “human side” of the system. In addition, JDC/RF programs engaging with the community creates more relationships between the JDC and active community resources (e.g., gyms; mentoring programs), giving youth and families access to a wider array of support services and activities and, in turn, helping JDCs sustain more services without relying on grant funding.

Ultimately, community engagement with JDC/RF programs helps fuel youth engagement in the community—by expanding access to available resources and leveraging all possible partners for program planning. Youth engaging the community helps affirm their role in society, develops useful life skills, and fosters a sense of belonging. Through a positive youth development approach, community engagement can enhance youths’ abilities and competencies by exposing them to supportive and empowering environments that foster skill-building and horizon-broadening experiences.²

Challenges to Community Engagement

JDCs face challenges in both aspects of community engagement—community engagement with the court and youth engagement with the community.

Identifying community resources/partners and establishing mechanisms to formally connect with those partners pose one set of challenges for JDCs. While these challenges are common across all JDC/RF programs, they present differently in different communities. For example, identifying community resources and partners may be easier in smaller communities, where JDC staff are more likely to be personally familiar with the individuals at other youth-serving organizations. In contrast, larger communities may have more community organizations offering a greater variety of services, but the size of those communities and lack of personal connection between staff members may render identification of and engagement with those organizations more difficult. These challenges can affect both community engagement with the JDC—by limiting the number of partners participating in program planning—as well as the availability of community services and, therefore, youth engagement with the community.

Even when JDCs successfully identify community partners, many barriers exist to establishing formal connections. Funding and resources are often a concern, both when attempting to engage partners with the court and when linking youth to community services. Limited resources can pose a challenge to engaging community organizations in JDC/RF project planning if potential partners cannot allocate staff time to attend meetings, etc. Similarly, funding limitations can

¹ Nissen, L.B. (2011). Community-directed engagement and positive youth development: Developing positive and progressive pathways between youth and their communities in Reclaiming Futures. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 33: S23-S28.

² Roth, J.L. & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2003). What exactly is a youth development program? Answers from research and practice. *Applied Developmental Science*. 7(2): 94-111.

also pose a challenge for engaging youth in the community, as some fee-based community services have limited capacity. Some JDCs also face explicit resistance when attempting to establish formal connections with potential community partners—particularly prosocial organizations (e.g., mentoring programs). Potential partners are sometimes reluctant to work with JDC youth, or with JDC/RF programs in general, because they perceive JDC youth as difficult or dangerous due to the stigma associated with juvenile justice and substance use. In addition, when engaging partners for JDC/RF policy and planning roles, some organizations that do not provide services may be unclear on their conceptual role within JDC/RF.

Finally, even when resources are available and partners are actively engaged, JDCs must successfully link individual youth (or families) with specific community partners—that is, they must facilitate youth engagement with the community. Facilitating engagement poses additional barriers, particularly creating successful linkages with active partners through streamlined processes and successfully filling gaps in community services. The referral process can be cumbersome and may require youth (or family members) to take initiative and overcome significant logistical and emotional barriers. For example, simply providing a youth with the main phone number for a community partner may require a teenager to negotiate the logistics of the referral process on his or her own, calling the main number for the social service entity, self-identifying as a JDC client, scheduling an intake appointment, establishing a recurring schedule with that provider, and securing transportation to and from that provider. Beyond the daunting nature of that referral and the potential for confusion or missed bureaucratic connections between the two agencies (e.g. potential miscommunications that hamper the referral), the location of partner services can present a major barrier. Lack of reliable, timely, or efficient transportation may prevent youth from engaging in a service, even if they wish to do so.

Policy Recommendations: Lessons Learned for Community Engagement

Policy recommendations for community engagement focus on strategies that help programs best leverage their engagement resources to address the four key areas identified above: identifying community resources/partners, establishing mechanisms to formally connect with potential partners, making successful referrals to active partners through streamlined processes, and successfully filling gaps in community services. The strategies are: (1) Conduct and Regularly Update a Community Resource Map, (2) Educate the JDC Team and the Community About the Role of Community in JDC/RF, (3) Develop a Formal Structure for Engaging Community Partners, and (4) Establish Protocols to Successfully Link Youth with Active Resources.

Educate the JDC Team and the Community About the Role of Community in JDC/RF

Making community organizations aware of potential opportunities to collaborate with the local JDC requires internal and external education. Internal education aims to ensure that each member of the JDC team can function as a community ambassador, understanding the role of community within JDC/RF and the program's community engagement system. External education, in turn, establishes formal and informal mechanisms for disseminating information about the JDC and potential partnership opportunities to leaders and resources in the community. Recommendations for internal and external education include:

- **Educate each team member about community engagement and JDC/RF.** Educating all team members on JDC/RF principles, the role of community engagement, and the specific needs of the local JDC provides a baseline level of knowledge, which ensures that every member of the team is capable of presenting the court, JDC/RF, and the role of community within the proper context. In addition, teaching JDC team members about basic communications principles can help them properly disseminate that information.
- **Use each team member as a community ambassador.** Encouraging every member of the team to promote the JDC/RF program within their own personal and professional networks can help reach more community organizations. In particular, because of the judicial leader's connections and position within the community, he

or she is often able to begin the engagement process with numerous community organizations. While this process is crucial for maximizing the JDC team's "reach," JDCs should also have a dedicated community contact for formal engagement (see below). Each member of the team should know how and when to involve that individual in his or her informal outreach efforts.

- **Publicize the JDC/RF program.** Launching a public relations campaign can also help publicize the JDC and attract potential partners. This process can include formal media campaigns (e.g., television and radio advertisements or articles in newspapers and other print media) and more informal public awareness activities, like sponsored events (e.g., a sponsored 5k race). Taken together, these efforts can help raise the JDC's community profile, making more potential partners aware of the program.

Develop a Formal Structure for Engaging Community Partners

Developing a formal structure for community engagement can ensure that potential partners are invited to attend future meetings and asked for concrete contributions (e.g., contributing mentors or providing gym memberships). Using a formal engagement structure provides guidance for both JDC/RF staff seeking to foster community engagement and for potential community partners looking to engage. Recommendations to formalize community engagement include:

- **Designate a specific and well-connected individual (or individuals) as the primary community contact.** 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. This community contact need not be a paid staff person but should have close ties to both the community and the JDC. In addition, selecting an individual who is well-connected with the community can help the JDC leverage valuable relationships. Informal connections made by other team members (see above) can be funneled to this official community contact to establish a formal connection. In addition, this person can conduct presentations about the JDC at other youth-serving organizations and invite those organizations to present to JDC staff, effectively "cross pollinating" each organization.
- **Approach potential partners with specific requests or proposals.** Approaching community partners with specific requests or proposals (e.g., 10 free gym memberships or dedicated space to host a monthly meeting) can help define the scope of the relationship and sets clear expectations for both organizations. For instance, establishing a robust community council can help open lines of communication between youth-serving agencies and foster an important dialogue; however, agencies and individuals are more likely to participate if they understand their role in the meeting and how they might benefit.
- **Set the terms of collaboration early in the teaming process.** Setting the terms of collaboration early in the teaming process can help solidify referral arrangements and avoid overburdening potential partners. In particular, JDCs should work with partners to establish a mutual understanding regarding data sharing and ancillary court participation. JDCs must consider their legitimate need for information while respecting the time and resources of their partners. It is important to establish mutually acceptable expectations with outside service providers (e.g., mentors or GED tutors) regarding data sharing (in both directions); written reports; or requirements to attend court, staffings, and change team meetings.
- **Cultivate mutually beneficial relationships.** Developing and cultivating mutually beneficial relationships can be the key to sustaining long-term community partnerships. JDCs must work with their community partners to find ways to make all partnerships truly bi-directional. This may include writing one another into grant proposals, helping link partners with one another at community meetings, or sharing outcome data from the court to support partner initiatives.

Create and Regularly Update a Community Resource Map

In any community, identifying community resources is the first step to engaging community partners. Developing, maintaining, and updating a “community resource map” is an effective way to systematically determine what organizations and resources are available. The community resource map can also be used as part of a plan to engage those organizations and cultivate complementary relationships. Strategies for identifying community resources include:

- **Create a community resource map.** Creating a community resource map of local youth-serving organizations and services 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. Once the court is engaged with the community, the community resource map can also help the community and the court work together to identify areas where additional services and/or capacity may be required (e.g., a shortage of in-home mental health services; youth internship programs).
- **Update the community resource map frequently.** Updating the map regularly (e.g., biannually or on an ongoing basis) will help staff stay abreast of and capitalize on the ever-changing array of community resources and programs.
- **Develop a feedback loop.** Incorporating a feedback loop to solicit input from community partners, youth, and families helps programs improve weaker aspects of their community engagement process and expand upon identified strengths. This feedback loop can include input on which resources a JDC should target, the JDC’s relationship with existing resources at an organizational level, and the youth and families’ experiences engaging with those partners in the community.

Establish Protocols to Successfully Link Youth with Active Resources

JDCs often develop connections with community partners to link youth and families with the services that those partners provide. While JDCs must engage community partners by fostering organizational cooperation; ultimately, active participation of JDC youth and families is required for successful youth engagement in the community. Developing a protocol to link youth with community partners is the final—and crucial—piece of community engagement. An active referral—a linkage in which a JDC representative makes a person-to-person referral with a community partner representative—is much more likely to result in engagement than simply giving the youth a partner’s phone number and inviting them to engage. Strategies for improving youth engagement with community partners include:

- **Lower barriers to youth engagement.** Working collaboratively with community partners to lower the barriers to youth engagement can help ensure successful referrals. JDCs can consult youth (formally or informally) to determine what barriers prevent them from engaging in the community (e.g., transportation; unsure of an organization’s location). JDCs can use this information to prioritize barriers, first targeting those that affect youth but are still relatively easy to address. For example, if youth report not knowing about community services or activities, JDCs can create a full list of community resources (based on their map), with information about how youth can access them.
- **Establish formal protocols to link youth to community partners.** Simply developing a dedicated protocol for JDC referrals (e.g., a specific point of contact) can be more welcoming than calling a general appointment scheduler. Similarly, establishing a feedback loop between community organizations and the court can help youth keep their appointments (e.g., confirmation that the youth attended), and reminding youth about community commitments can help improve engagement (e.g., texting reminders).
- **Identify resources to facilitate active linkages.** Identifying resources to facilitate active linkages can also improve youth engagement with community providers. Case managers (or other staff members) can help link JDC youth/families with community partners. This assistance can range from calling the provider together to

schedule an appointment to arranging (or providing) transportation to/from the provider. While not all JDCs have the resources necessary to dedicate staff time to these sorts of active linkages, programs may be able to leverage mentors and other natural helpers to facilitate these referrals without incurring direct expenses.

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](mailto:ssstevens@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. The views expressed here are the authors and do not necessarily represent the official policies of OJJDP 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). Community Engagement in Juvenile Drug Court: Lessons Learned. The University of Arizona: Tucson, Arizona.