



Family Accountability and Recovery Court in North Carolina Reunites Women in Recovery With Their Families

The path to recovery for women separated from their children by substance use is uphill and potholed with regret, stigma, and relapse—concepts that few courts are equipped to address, fewer still to treat.

But that is precisely what the Family Accountability and Recovery Court (FARC) in rural Lenoir, Wayne, and Greene counties in North Carolina is doing—and it's working, as evidenced by a growing list of accolades. For the (mostly) women participants already separated from, or at risk of losing, their children because of substance use and/or neglect, FARC has emerged as their best hope for—and practical path toward—reunification. Indeed, it provides them with treatment, intensive case management comprising weekly contact with FARC staff members and recovery group meetings, and judicial supervision specifically to achieve that outcome.

"We do everything we can, from incentives to sanctions, to help provide participants with answers to their issues," said Eighth District Court Chief Judge Beth Heath, the driving force behind FARC. "Our top priorities are to get regular random drug tests twice a week, to get them regular and stable in their treatment, and to have them come to drug court. Then we work toward increased visitation with their children, so that hopefully they can get custody back. That's the ultimate goal."

"I heard another judge use this phrase, and I like it: 'We're not here to get your children back for you but to get you back for your children,'" she said.

The upshot? FARC is now a nationally recognized model for its collaborative approach, one that is incrementally reframing how one jurisdiction thinks about justice as it relates to substance use—and in the process chipping away at stigma. [Last November](#), FARC was selected by the [Rural Justice Collaborative](#) (RJC) as one of nine Rural Innovation Sites that will serve as examples for other communities nationwide. Over the next three years, the



Audra Haddad, administrator for FARC in North Carolina's Lenoir, Wayne, and Greene counties, left, and Eighth District Court Chief Judge Beth Heath

RJC will work with FARC to create educational materials that will be featured on an online resource center and to offer visits to FARC by leaders from other communities, thanks to funding from the State Justice Institute.

"Rural community leaders often don't have the resources to develop programs from scratch, but we know that many rural justice leaders, like those from FARC, have found innovative solutions to their complex problems," said Tara Kunkel, executive director of Rulo Strategies, which organized the RJC in partnership with the National Center for State Courts. "Before this, there had been no nationally concerted effort for justice leaders and their collaborators in other sectors to share what they know. The Innovation Sites provide a framework that others can build from."

FARC's national recognition has been matched at the local level: Judge Heath was presented [last fall](#) with a Community Health Hero Award by the Lenoir County Alliance for a Healthy Community, a coalition that promotes healthy living in the county through partnerships between the public and private sectors.

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FARC has been recognized locally and nationally for its innovative and effective approach to reuniting parents and children separated by substance use.

That recognition, now backed by funding from the Bureau of Justice Assistance’s (BJA) Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP) and a series of grants from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), part of the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs, speaks to the growing institutionalization of FARC’s model in Lenoir, Wayne, and Greene counties. In many ways, it was a process as challenging as the one faced by its clients as they undertake the painstaking work of reunification with their families.

A Long Road

FARC’s forebear was a family drug court piloted in Wayne County in 2005. Clients, most often parents whose substance use had caused them to lose their children to foster care or other placements, were referred to the court from an abuse, neglect, and dependency court. Lenoir County followed suit in 2007 with a court of its own. By then, the courts were receiving state funding, and Judge Heath had joined the effort.

That changed in 2011, however, when the North Carolina legislature abruptly eliminated funding for the court

programs. Judge Heath felt like the rug had been pulled out from under her.

“I did not want to quit the work I was doing, so I started exploring other ways to fund [the court],” she said. “We first received \$30,000 from our managed care organization and later \$70,000. We received donations from the ABC board and other local groups. We did our best, but we still didn’t have enough to hire staff and were operating on a shoestring.”

It was then that Judge Heath was introduced to the grantmaking world.

“We first applied for federal funding in 2013, which was unsuccessful. We participated in a project through the UNC [University of North Carolina] School of Government. During that time, we were able to work with a grant writer. We also partnered with the National Center for State Courts for additional grant writing assistance. One thing led to another, and [we received the COSSAP and OJJDP grants in 2020](#), which enabled me, *finally*, to hire staff, and that’s made the greatest difference.”

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FARC has received funding from COSSAP and OJJDP.

Now, in addition to Judge Heath, FARC boasts a coordinator, Audra Haddad, a peer support specialist, and a case coordinator—enough staff to handle 12 to 14 cases at a given time with a goal of graduating 25 participants annually. Enrollees are referred to FARC from other local courts in the three counties and typically have involvement with child welfare services.

Participants are placed into one of two tracks based on whether the Department of Social Services (DSS) has filed a petition in the Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency court. Track 1 (usually involving a DSS petition) is for participants with moderate to severe substance use; Track 2 (usually involving DSS intervention but no petition) is for participants with mild to moderate substance use. Each track comprises phases that address different needs during recovery. The initial phases help participants with stabilization of their treatment regimens and semiweekly drug screenings, although they are not expected to be entirely drug-free at that point. Later phases help participants continue to work toward abstinence and recovery, while FARC team members help participants improve their parenting skills and address their employment and educational needs. The last phase of both Track 1 and 2 involves preparing participants for graduation, which they celebrate with their families, and ensuring that the support system they developed during treatment is maintained post-reentry.

“The whole team is very positive, and we really enjoy celebrating success,” said Haddad. “It’s hard to get clean and it takes courage to get help. So, it’s important that they take advantage of the relationships they develop

here. They may not leave happy, but they know they’re supported. And it’s a beautiful thing when they accept that.”

For Judge Heath, FARC is a hands-on process: She meets personally with each participant, an attorney, and treatment providers every two weeks to monitor progress toward goals—always with a focus on reuniting parents with their children.

“That’s the ultimate goal, so we’ll do whatever we can to help,” Judge Heath said. “Participants in a traditional court don’t usually spend much time talking directly to a judge, but here I talk to them a lot, so that no one falls through the cracks. I ask them how they’re feeling, how is their treatment coming along.”

“In some cases, we’ll ask them to write goodbye letters to their children,” she added. “It’s a sanction, but the goal is to try to figure out why they are not doing what they’re supposed to be doing and to change their behavior. The idea is, ‘If you don’t engage in this [recovery effort], you may end up losing your children.’ And so, they write a letter to their kids telling them goodbye. They usually say they are sorry for having let them down, that they deserve better, and that they love them. In the process, they’ve taken a minute to think it through, and it’s been helpful.”

Atop the list of FARC success stories for both Haddad and Judge Heath is a woman (name withheld) in her thirties who lost custody of her two children because of substance use. “She was a real mess,” Haddad said.

“She was so sick, we thought she was going to die,” Judge Heath said. “But then she came into court and decided that was the day. We put her in a car and took her to a residential detox facility an hour away, then to another where she stayed for six months. All the time we continued to work with her, and she still came to court in Kinston (Lenoir County seat).”

“Ultimately, we got her into the House of Hope, and now she looks like a different person. She’s a lady now, and she made it possible for herself. And I’m confident she’ll be reunited with her children.”

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House of Hope

House of Hope, a 16-bed transitional housing facility in Kinston, North Carolina, which opened in the spring of 2021, is the latest addition to FARC's support system. It is the fruit of [Hope Restorations, Inc.](#), a local faith-based nonprofit organization that restores homes for rehabilitation programming. Each year, Hope Restorations, Inc. founder Chris Jenkins agrees to partner with Judge Heath to accept eight to ten referrals from FARC, in addition to referrals from local prisons and rehabilitation centers.

Norma Barnes, vice president of administration and women's programs at Hope Restorations, Inc., said the referred individuals fill out an extensive application, after which they are interviewed by program staff members.

"But then we let people make their own decisions about whether they're going to come," Barnes said. "Whether or not they're successful depends on how badly they want it. Some are not ready. But overall, they're doing good."

Once in the facility, House of Hope residents advance through three program phases of 30 days each, which may be extended if needed. In phase one, residents are supervised closely, are not allowed phones or visitors, and may leave the facility only to attend scheduled appointments. During phase two, phone and visitor privileges are restored, and freedom of movement is gradually increased. Phase three sees residents preparing to move into their own homes.

"Most of the time, we can tell within the first 30 days whether they're going to make it or not," Barnes said. "It's just their mindset. Many of them are just tired and want to be reunited with their families."



The House of Hope in Kinston, North Carolina, a 16-bed transitional housing facility restored by Hope Restorations, Inc.

And for the residents who graduate?

"We love watching their lives change. We really do bond with them, in fact. It's a very rewarding program," Barnes said. "Drugs are a never-ending battle in Lenoir County; there are always new ones coming in. These are people who nobody wants to give a chance, who might have a [prison] record. That's what we do: We give them a chance and believe in them."

For Judge Heath, that opportunity to inject hope into FARC participants' lives made her feel "that this is where I'm supposed to be."

"I accept the premise that these people are very sick and that we have to treat it that way," she said. "But to me, it's why I'm here, that's my role. And the people who succeed make it all worth it."