

Learning Sites Initiative



In 1997 there were four known mental health courts (MHCs) in the country. By January 2004 the number of MHCs had risen to 70 in 29 states. As of February 2005, there are 107 known courts in 34 states.¹

The number of mental health courts in operation in the U.S. has grown exponentially over the past decade. To assist professionals designing or operating a mental health court, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) is issuing a series of publications.² In addition, BJA and its sister agency, the National Institute of Justice, together with the MacArthur Foundation, has commissioned research, which once completed will inform experience in the field as to whether MHCs are effective and what aspects of these programs are particularly important to their success.

BJA recognizes that even with this information available, there is no substitute for peer-to-peer assistance. State or local officials who are considering developing an MHC, wrestling with planning issues around the possible design of their program, or reviewing the operations of their existing court often look to more-established courts for guidance, practical experience, and to observe an existing court in practice.

To facilitate efficient and effective peer-to-peer assistance among MHCs, the BJA, through its technical assistance provider the Council of State Governments (CSG), will establish and coordinate a network of four to eight learning sites located across the country that represent a cross-section of urban and rural jurisdictions.

The Learning Sites Initiative is part of the technical assistance offered by the Bureau of Justice Assistance Mental Health Courts Grant Program.

Information about the MHCP and mental health courts generally can be found on the MHCP Web site at: <http://consensusproject.org/mhcourts/>. Additional information about the Learning Sites Initiative will be available on the Web site soon.

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What is the Role of Learning Sites?

While MHCs are a promising strategy for improving the response to people with mental illness in the justice system, their empirical effectiveness is, as yet, unproven. This is true even for the courts that will be designated as learning sites. Accordingly, courts named learning sites will not be held as models to be necessarily replicated by other jurisdictions.

How Will Learning Sites be Identified?

BJA, through CSG, and in collaboration with a number of experts in the field, will consider many criteria when selecting learning sites, including the following:

- Interest in providing guidance to other courts and willingness to expend time providing this guidance;
- Longevity, defined as operation for more than two years, and demonstrated likelihood of long-term sustainability;
- Whether the court functions as part of a continuum of strategies in a community to improve the response to people with mental illness in the justice system;
- Willingness to revise and refine its own operations based on the input of outside expertise or internal reviews, or implementation of quality improvement mechanisms;

What Are the Expectations from Learning Sites?

BJA and CSG acknowledge that learning sites are operational MHCs with significant time and personnel constraints. Interested MHCs should take into account the following activities when considering whether to become a learning site:

- *Participating in meetings* – Selected learning sites will convene periodically to participate in small national meetings (travel expenses to be paid by BJA's contractor);
- *Hosting site visits* – Learning sites will be expected to host teams from jurisdictions planning or implementing an MHC and dedicate time

Learning sites will, however, fulfill an important need. They will:

- Provide useful assistance to other jurisdictions based on their experiences;
 - Showcase sample strategies for problem-solving in particular aspects of mental health court administration;
 - Illustrate issues common to courts across the nation for other courts, researchers, and commentators.
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- Inclusion of a data collection protocol and active data collection practices in the court's daily operations;
 - Operation and oversight by a group of stakeholders founded on strong collaborative relationships;
 - Close coordination with the state- or county-based mental health system;
 - History of knowledge dissemination around the topic of people with mental illness in the courts.

Few, if any, existing MHC's meet all of these criteria. Accordingly, some learning sites may be selected based upon their demonstrated ability to meet one or more of these criteria especially well.

Where Can I Learn More About the Learning Sites Initiative?

If your court is interested in participating in the Learning Sites Initiative, you are encouraged to provide your information through an online survey coordinated by CSG. The survey is a component of the registration process for *Mental Health Courts and Beyond: Improving the Response to People With Mental Illness in the Criminal Justice System*, a conference coordinated by CSG to be held June 21-22 in Los Angeles. To provide your information for the Learning Sites Initiative, and to register for the upcoming conference, visit: <http://www.consensusproject.org/mhcourts/conf/>.

1. The number of mental health courts in the country is documented in the National Survey of Mental Health Courts (www.mentalhealthcourt-survey.com), maintained by the Council of State Governments, the National GAINS Center and NAMI.

2. In its capacity as technical assistance provider for the Bureau of Justice Assistance's Mental Health Courts Program (MHCP), the Council of

State Governments will soon release four policy briefs: *A Guide to Mental Health Court Design and Implementation*; *What Is A Mental Health Court?*; *A Practical Guide to Collecting Outcome Data for Mental Health Courts*; and *Navigating the Mental Health Maze*. These publications will soon be available for download or purchase at the MHCP Web site, www.consensusproject.org/mhcourts.