

House Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies

“FY 2019 Public Witness Testimony”

**Statement of Judge Michael Barrasse, Lackawanna County, PA  
Chairman, National Association of Drug Court Professionals**

**on behalf of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals**

April 4, 2019

To Chairman Serrano, Ranking Member Aderholt, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to have the opportunity to submit my testimony on behalf of this nation’s over 3,000 drug courts and the 150,000 people they will connect to life-saving addiction and mental health treatment this year. Given the unprecedented success of drug courts, and the urgent and growing need for solutions to the addiction epidemic that promote both public health and public safety, **I am requesting the Congress maintain the enacted fiscal year 2019 numbers of \$77 million for the authorized Drug Court Discretionary Grant Program (Pub. L. 115-271) and \$22 million for the authorized Veterans Treatment Court Program at the Department of Justice (Pub. L. 114-198).**

I serve as President Judge of the Lackawanna County Court of Common Pleas in Pennsylvania, where I have been on the bench for nineteen years. I also have the privilege of presiding over the county’s drug court and veterans treatment court. Before becoming a judge, I served three terms as Lackawanna County’s district attorney. No aspect of my legal career has been as consequential, effective and personally rewarding as my involvement with drug courts and other treatment courts.

Lackawanna County is a testament to the significant impact these programs have on communities grappling with addiction and related crime. By bringing together the criminal justice community, treatment and social service agencies and organizations - including the Department of Veterans Affairs - and local government, our drug court and veterans treatment court ensures individuals who come before the court with a substance use and/or mental health disorder receive the treatment and accountability needed to transform their lives. This translates into cost-savings for taxpayers and reduced drug use and crime for the community.

Behind the statistics, however, are real people who come before me mired in the deepest depths of addiction; individuals with no hope for a future without drugs; who’ve been given up on by their friends and families. People like Sandra, for example, who were addicted for years and eventually succumbed to crime to support her habit. Her home life was in chaos and she risked losing custody of her four children. That was two-and-a-half years ago. Today, she is a graduate of drug court. She has a job, is back with her family and is living a life of recovery. At her graduation, she said, “This is the beginning of the rest of my life. Recovery was something that seemed so impossible to do, but this program helped me do it. I didn’t think I would be able to, but they are truly amazing and really want me to get better.”

Had she not come to participate in drug court, she would likely be behind bars. Or worse. Sandra is just one of the 150,000 people nationally who get access to treatment through drug court each year. What started as an experiment three decades ago is today the most successful strategy for addressing addiction and mental health in the justice system. In fact, no other intervention in our nation's history has anywhere near comparable evidence of reducing recidivism and saving taxpayer dollars.

Our drug court, like thousands across the country, serves individuals whose involvement in the justice system is linked to a substance use and/or mental health disorder. The population we serve is generally facing incarceration for crimes ranging from forgery and theft to fraud and DUI. Before drug court, there were few sentencing options, and most of these cases resulted in continued recidivism at great cost to taxpayers and continued damage to offenders' families. Instead, drug court brings treatment providers into the courtroom to ensure each participant receives an individualized, evidence-based treatment plan - including addiction medication when appropriate - and work as a team with law enforcement, probation, defense, prosecution and the judge to provide ongoing supervision, support and accountability. This community-based approach allows drug courts to identify and meet individual needs beyond clinical treatment, from education, employment and housing assistance to family reunification, restitution and healthcare.

Research continues to confirm that this comprehensive approach works. The Government Accountability Office finds drug courts reduce crime by up to 58%. Widely regarded as the most comprehensive study on drug court to date, the Department of Justice National Institute of Justice Multi-Site Drug Court Evaluation (MADCE) confirmed drug court significantly reduces both drug use and crime, and found cost savings averaging \$6,000 for every individual served. The MADCE found drug courts improve education, employment, housing and financial stability for nearly all participants. They are proven to promote family reunification, reduce foster care placements and increase the rate of addicted mothers delivering babies who are fully drug-free.

Several years ago this successful model was expanded to serve veterans in Lackawanna County struggling to reengage following their service. Veterans treatment court builds on the drug court model but ensures veterans with substance use or mental health disorders are connected to the appropriate local, state and federal resources they have earned. Allowing veterans to go through the treatment court process surrounded by other veterans creates an environment where they are more receptive to the help being offered.

The success of drug courts and other treatment courts in Lackawanna County is transforming the community's attitudes around addiction and recovery. This month Recovery Bank will open in downtown Scranton. The Recovery Bank is a community center providing a safe, supportive place for people in recovery from addiction, their family, friends and those interested in engaging in activities beneficial to the individual and community. The first of its kind in the state, Recovery Bank volunteers will operate a food pantry, coordinate with Lackawanna County Prison staff to prepare inmates with substance use disorders for life after incarceration, operate a peer recovery program to connect individuals in treatment with a peer support specialist and work with treatment court participants to provide recovery support services.

Like the rest of the nation, Lackawanna County has been devastated by the opioid epidemic and the greater addiction epidemic gripping this nation. Our drug courts and other treatment courts are on the front lines of ensuring we have an effective, evidence-based response that saves lives, reunites families and makes the community safer.

Our robust network of treatment courts have benefitted, and continue to benefit, greatly from federal funding provided by the Department of Justice. I encourage this committee to focus on proven programs which guarantee financial returns and measurable success. There is no better example than drug courts and other treatment courts.