

Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government

Outside Witness Testimony
Fiscal Year 2022 Appropriations

**Statement of Hon. Robert Helfrich
Judge, 12th Judicial District of Mississippi**

on behalf of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals

June 22, 2021

Chairman Van Hollen, Ranking Member Hyde-Smith, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I am honored to have the opportunity to submit my testimony on behalf of 40,000 treatment court professionals working in adult drug courts, family treatment courts, juvenile drug treatment courts, tribal healing to wellness courts, DWI courts, and veterans treatment courts. These lifesaving treatment court programs serve more than 150,000 people across the United States each year. **I am requesting Congress provide level funding of \$3 million to the authorized Drug Court Training and Technical Assistance Program (Pub. L. 115-271) at the Office of National Drug Control Policy for fiscal year 2022.**

As an alternative to incarceration, treatment courts connect people in the justice system with individualized, evidence-based treatment, and recovery support services. Key to ensuring fidelity to the successful treatment court model is continued education and training for the full multidisciplinary team, which includes the judge, treatment providers, defense attorney, prosecutor, law enforcement, community supervision, and others. In fact, research shows treatment courts whose full multidisciplinary team participates in training see a 55 percent reduction in recidivism among program graduates. Treatment court programs must follow a robust national model shaped by more than 30 years of empirical research in order to achieve these successes.

I have the privilege of presiding over the 12th Judicial Circuit Drug Court in Forrest and Perry Counties, Mississippi. I know firsthand the importance of training and technical assistance in ensuring fidelity to the model. This is why my treatment court team takes part in regular training and technical assistance to ensure we meet the rigorous evidence-based standards proven to increase positive outcomes. We receive training at the state and national level that proves critical to serving the unique needs of the participants in our program. The training we receive greatly helps to fine-tune our program and obtain the best possible outcomes.

With the nation in the grips of unprecedented overlapping crises of substance use and the COVID-19 pandemic, now, more than ever before, this training and technical assistance program is needed to educate drug courts on critical issues. Issues such as medication-assisted treatment, overdose prevention, and finding ways to increase the census of drug courts.

Drug courts are the most researched intervention in the history of the American justice system. The Government Accountability Office finds the treatment court model reduces

crime by up to 58 percent. Further, the National Institute of Justice Multi-Site Adult Drug Court Evaluation, the largest and most comprehensive multi-site evaluation of treatment courts ever conducted, confirmed treatment courts significantly reduce both drug use and crime, and found cost savings averaging \$6,000 for every individual served. Additional benefits include improved employment, housing, financial stability, and reduced foster care placements. These outcomes go beyond the participants in my program; they have an undeniable effect on their entire families, often breaking the generational cycle of substance use disorder.

I have watched as people mired in the deepest depths of addiction come before me. Individuals with, in their mind, no hope for a future without drugs and whom many would discount as beyond help in our justice system. But time after time, I watch as those same individuals overcome their substance use or mental health disorder and live productive lives. Most go on to raise families, begin growing careers, and help others in the similar difficult positions they once found themselves in. Individuals like Shayna, one of our many successful graduates.

Shayna struggled with substance use disorder for years to cope with past trauma. She was incarcerated four times due to drug-related crimes. When she was arrested the last time, she was unemployed, homeless, and no longer had a connection to her family.

All that changed when Shayna came to our treatment court program. For the first time, she was given hope and encouragement in the courtroom. The program's multidisciplinary team created an individualized plan to give her the tools she needed to find recovery and break the cycle of addiction. In treatment court, she found a team of advocates who looked beyond the ineffective solution of incarceration and instead committed themselves to her well-being.

Our treatment court program gave Shayna so much more than an alternative to incarceration. It's because of the program Shayna regained her driver's license, established safe housing, reconnected with her family, and received treatment for substance use and mental health disorders. Shayna found a new passion for helping others overcome their addictions, and she is now a peer support specialist.

Shayna is not alone in her success. Treatment courts in this country have connected 1.5 million people with mental health and substance use disorders with lifesaving treatment options best suited to them, including medication-assisted treatment when deemed appropriate by a medical provider.

Now, more than ever before, education and training for treatment courts are critical to ensure they have the best possible outcomes and can expand to meet a growing demand. For example, training provided through federal funds on issues such as medication-assisted treatment, overdose prevention, and ensuring racial and ethnic equity and inclusion are critical to all treatment court programs as they look to address the fallout their communities are facing from these crises.

Drug court training and technical assistance funding at the Office of National Drug Control Policy ensures treatment courts across the country can continue providing quality, evidence-based care to participants struggling with mental health and substance use disorders. I encourage this committee to provide level funding of \$3 million for the Drug Court Training and Technical Assistance Program at the Office of National Drug Control Policy. There is no better example than treatment courts for proven programs that guarantee financial returns and measurable success.