

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

Outside Witness Testimony
Fiscal Year 2022 Appropriations

Statement of Eli Parson
Graduate of the San Francisco Family Treatment Court
San Francisco, California

on behalf of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals

June 22, 2021

Chairwoman Shaheen, Ranking Member Moran, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I am honored to have the opportunity to submit my testimony on behalf of the 1.5 million graduates of treatment court programs and the 150,000 people the programs will connect to lifesaving addiction and mental health treatment this year alone. Given the overlapping crises of substance use and the COVID-19 pandemic, **I am requesting that Congress provide funding of \$100 million for the Drug Court Discretionary Grant Program and \$30 million for the Veterans Treatment Court Grant Program at the Department of Justice for fiscal year 2022.**

I am writing to you today as a treatment court graduate, father, and advocate for parents and children affected by substance use disorder. I am a 2008 graduate of the San Francisco Family Treatment Court—a program of the family civil court system that allowed me to remain a father while connecting me with the support, treatment services, and parental coaching I needed to overcome a lifelong substance use disorder. Without the support of the court, my now 13-year-old daughter would be growing up in the child welfare system without her father. Instead, she is a healthy, thriving teenager preparing for her first year of high school with me by her side. The treatment court drastically changed the trajectory of both our lives.

Since 2011, I have worked for the Homeless Prenatal Program, an organization that serves, among other child welfare programs, the San Francisco Family Treatment Court. In that role, I witness firsthand the transformation and triumph families experience as parents overcome substance use disorders and are reunited with their children. But I'm also seeing the grips of twin crises on families coming to me for help: the substance use epidemic and the ongoing effects of COVID-19, including isolation and economic devastation. Treatment courts, such as adult drug courts, veterans treatment courts, family treatment courts, and others offer a public health and public safety response to these crises as they seek to enhance and expand to serve more individuals in their communities.

With overwhelming empirical evidence showing their effectiveness, it is easy to see that treatment court programs across the country merit continued funding. The Government Accountability Office finds the drug court model reduces crime by up to 58%. Further, the Multi-Site Adult Drug Court Evaluation conducted by the Department of Justice confirmed drug treatment courts significantly reduce both drug use and crime, as well as finding cost savings

averaging \$6,000 for every individual served. Additional benefits include improved employment, housing, financial stability, and reduced foster care placements. Veterans treatment courts, which expand on the drug court model to include veteran justice outreach specialists from the Department of Veterans Affairs, volunteer veteran mentors from the community, and a myriad of veteran-specific local, state, and federal resources have proven equally effective. As our heroes in uniform continue to transition home, it is critical that we have interventions like veterans treatment court in place to ensure they have the treatment, structure, and support to transform the lives of those who will inevitably struggle.

Beyond the numbers, treatment court programs are making a difference in real families across the country, including mine. When my daughter was born in 2007, child welfare services prevented me from bringing her home from the hospital. At that time, I was in the midst of a decades-long battle with substance use. Childhood trauma led me to trying alcohol at age 12, using harder drugs by age 14, homelessness at age 16, and a lifelong struggle with depression and anxiety. Leaving the hospital empty-handed was the most painful moment of my life. It was then I knew I had to do what I could to earn the right to bring my daughter to the home she deserved. I knew I wanted to change—I just needed help.

I found that help in the San Francisco Family Treatment Court. Until I entered the program, my experience with the court system left me feeling silenced in my own battle to be healthy and regain custody of my daughter. In treatment court, I found hope for the first time, something I'd longed to feel for years. Suddenly, I became an active participant in a journey to finding my own health and safety so that I could guarantee the same for my daughter when we were reunited. The multidisciplinary team of the judge, child welfare officers, substance use treatment providers, and others were committed to ensuring I received the intensive outpatient treatment and other social services I needed to ensure my daughter could be reunited with a father free of substance use.

The services I received through this treatment court program allowed me to realize my life's greatest achievement: fatherhood. My daughter has never known the man sent away from the hospital that day in 2007, and it's because of the San Francisco Family Treatment Court.

I'm not alone in my success. Treatment courts have reunited thousands of families by connecting those with mental health and substance use disorders with treatment options best suited to them, including medication-assisted treatment when deemed appropriate by a medical provider. Together, the court team offers the tools to overcome addiction and past trauma to create meaningful, healthy relationships.

Continued support from the Drug Court Discretionary Grant Program at the Department of Justice ensures the nearly 4,000 treatment courts in the United States today provide critical services to reunite loving families. But we know there are many more who still need this opportunity. I strongly urge this committee to recommend funding of \$100 million to the Drug Court Discretionary Grant Program and \$30 million to the Veterans Treatment Court Grant Program in fiscal year 2022, so families like mine continue to receive lifesaving services.