

Stearns County Minnesota Pilot Drug Court

Preliminary Process Evaluation

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The U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Courts Program Office has published “Defining Drug Courts: The Key Components” (1997). These ten key components are described as “benchmarks” that “describe the very best practices designs and operations of drug courts for adults with alcohol and other drug problems (p. 3).” This preliminary process evaluation, for the Stearns County Pilot Drug Court, will follow the model of the process evaluations of several other jurisdictions and use these ten key components to describe the operations of the current drug court; to evaluate the court’s success in meeting its operational objectives; to identify areas that should be improved; and to identify issues that will require further examination and development in later evaluations.

Information Sources

Information for this evaluation comes from the most recent grant proposal for the Stearns County Drug Court; observations of two drug court staff meetings and drug court sessions; discussions with drug court team members during a training workshop; and from Brigid Murphy, drug court coordinator, who provided all requested information from the drug court’s database. I would like to thank Brigid for her tireless efforts to provide this information.

Goals and Objectives

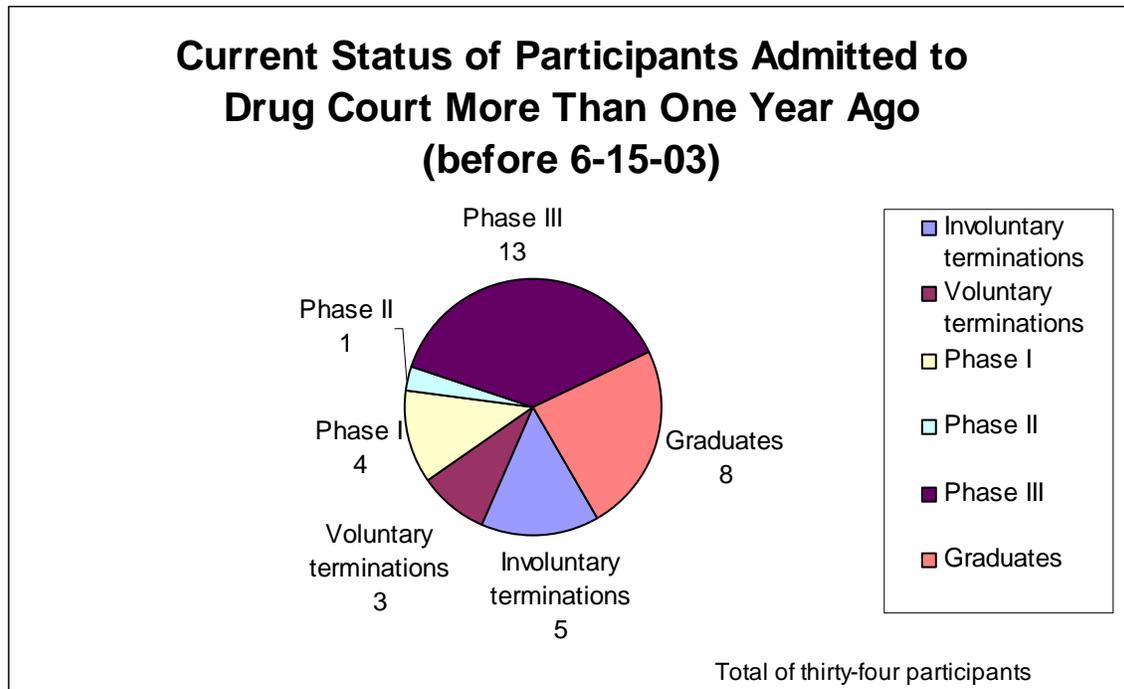
The primary goals of the Stearns County Pilot Drug Court are the following:

- (1) Reduce substance abuse among criminal offenders.
- (2) Enhance public safety by reducing criminal recidivism.
- (3) Assist offenders in developing personal, family and social skills and relationships to become more productive citizens.

Several individual objectives for each of these goals have also been defined. Some of these individual objectives deal with operational goals like the time that it takes to assess and admit new participants. The success of the drug court in meeting some of those objectives will be discussed in this preliminary process evaluation. Conclusions with respect to other individual objectives, like the degree of improvement in a drug court graduate's educational level, require more participants to have graduated. These will be examined in later follow-up process evaluations and an outcome evaluation. A full list of the individual objectives appears below in the section on monitoring and evaluation.

The first entrants to the Stearns County Drug Court were on July 22, 2002. Typically, two or three new people are screened for eligibility each month. For the purposes of this preliminary process evaluation, the time period under review runs from July 2002 until June 15th, 2004. During that time, there were fifty-four drug court participants. Because it takes at least one year to complete the drug court program, the Stearns County Drug Court has only recently seen a significant number of graduates. Thirty-four of those fifty-four participants were admitted to drug court before June 15th, 2003 and thus had at least

one year to complete the program. It is too early to begin to address issues that are central to an outcome evaluation, like rates of criminal recidivism, but the following chart provides a quick view of the current status of participants admitted to drug court more than one year ago.



In short, eight have graduated; eight have terminated (either voluntarily or involuntarily) and the remaining eighteen participants remain in one of the three phases of the program. Because we cannot yet be certain how many of those eighteen will eventually graduate, at this point, the number of “drop-outs” is the same as the number of graduates, so the graduation rate is 50%. Based on a review of process evaluations of other drug courts and defining graduation the same way, a 50% rate graduation is typical. The most recent systematic review of drug court evaluations reports the average graduation rate across

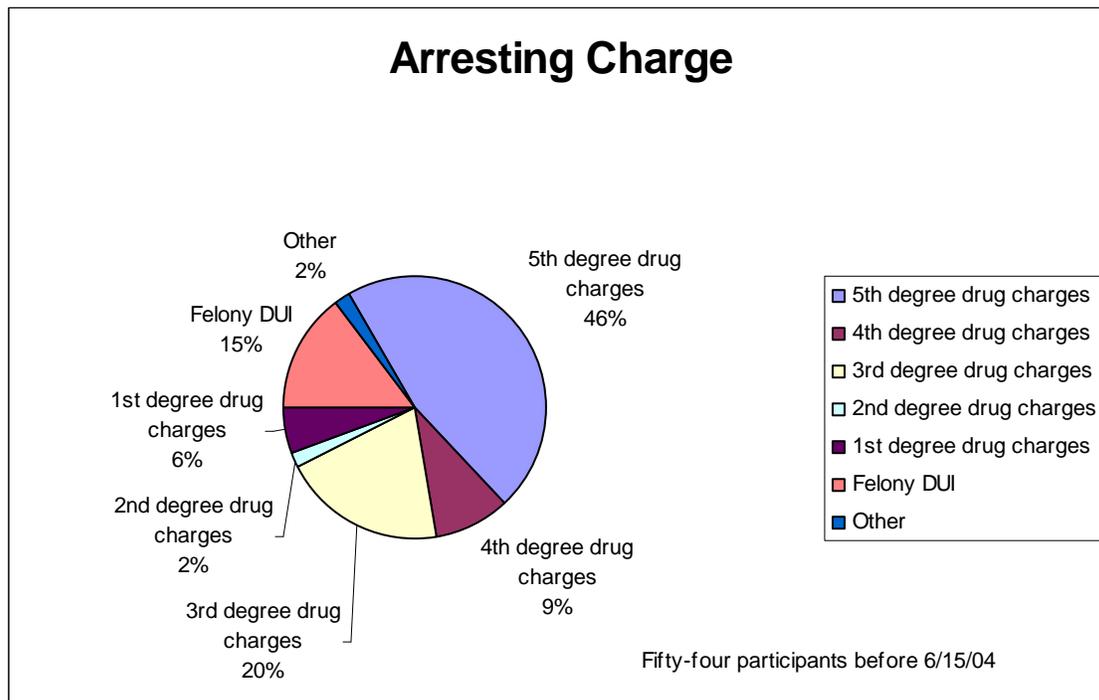
several jurisdictions was 47%. [Steven Belenko, Research on Drug Courts: A Critical Review 2001 Update, p. 25.]

While it is too early to draw any conclusions about recidivism, that information is currently being collected on drug court graduates. At present, of the eight graduates, one has had a re-arrest for driving after cancellation and another has a pending probation revocation hearing for continued drug use (based on the participant's self-reported drug use), but was he not re-arrested.

Eligibility and Target Population:

- ❖ The target population consists of felony level non-violent adult (18 years and older) drug offenders charged with a third, fourth or fifth degree controlled substance crime, as defined by Minnesota Statutes. Those selected must be in need of treatment as defined in the state mandated chemical use assessment tool. Both first time offenders and repeat offenders who meet these requirements are eligible for participation. Individuals with significant criminal histories, who have not been terminated from a comparable drug court program, and who are identified as amendable to probation are eligible as well. Eligibility also allows for first and second-degree offenders to be admitted in the program provided that the admission is a joint motion from the parties.

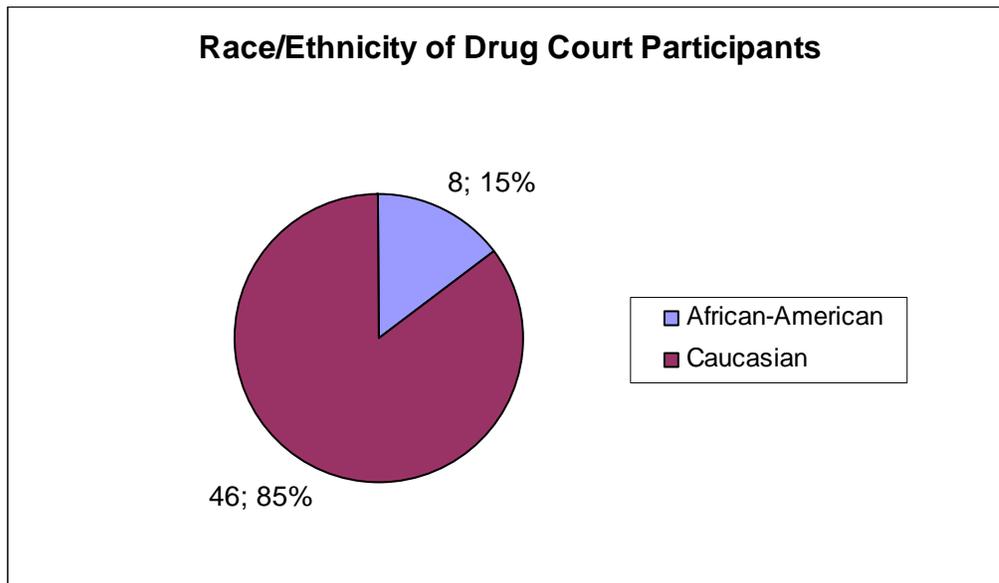
- ❖ The following chart summarizes the arresting charge for the 54 drug court participants.



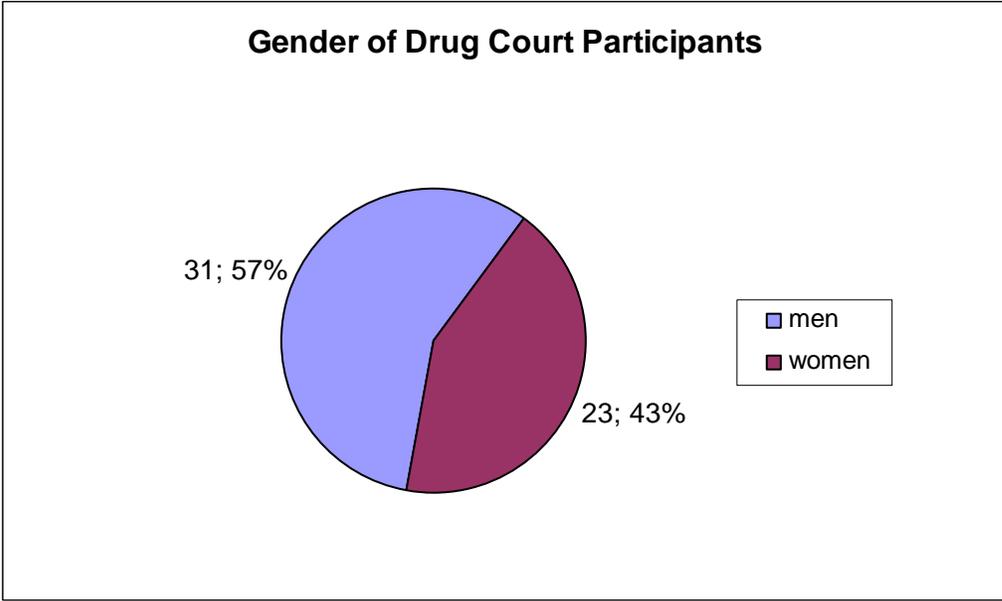
- ❖ Stearns County is a large geographic area located in central Minnesota. The total population as of the 2000 census is 133,166.
 - Ninety-five percent of the population is Caucasian, 1.6% is Asian –American, 0.8% are African – Americans and 1.4% are Latino/Hispanic.
 - According to St. Cloud Police Department and Stearns County Sheriff’s Office statistics, there were 544 arrests for all drug related offenses in Stearns County in 2003.

- The racial make up of this arrestee population is 72% white, 4.7% Latino, 18.3% African-American; and 5% Asian.

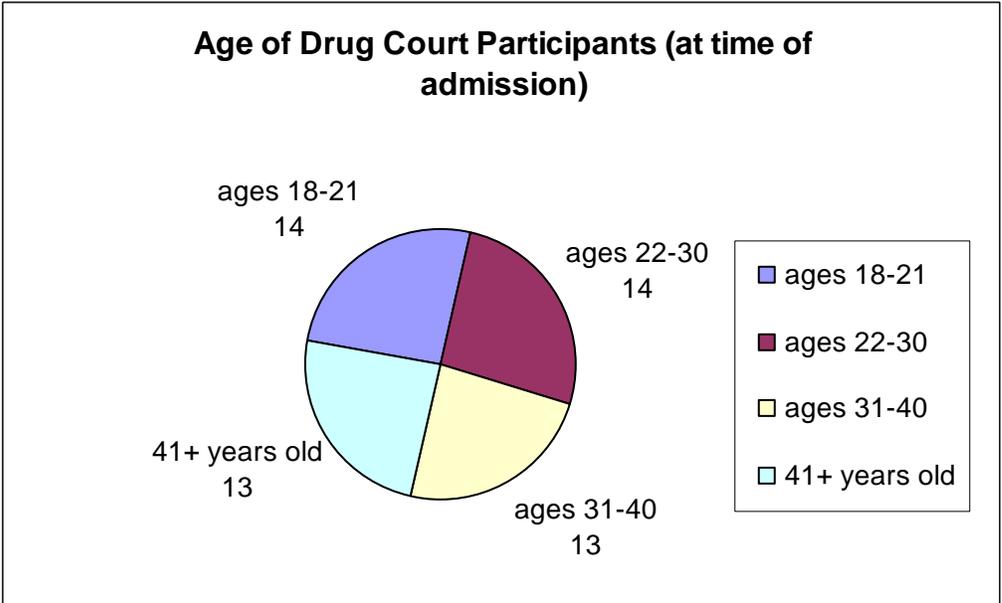
As the following chart shows, the Stearns County Pilot Drug Court program has admitted 15% percent of participants who were non-whites. Although this exceeds the non-white percentages in the general population, the number of non-whites who were eligible for drug court participation was, generally, reflective of their percentage of the overall arrestee population.



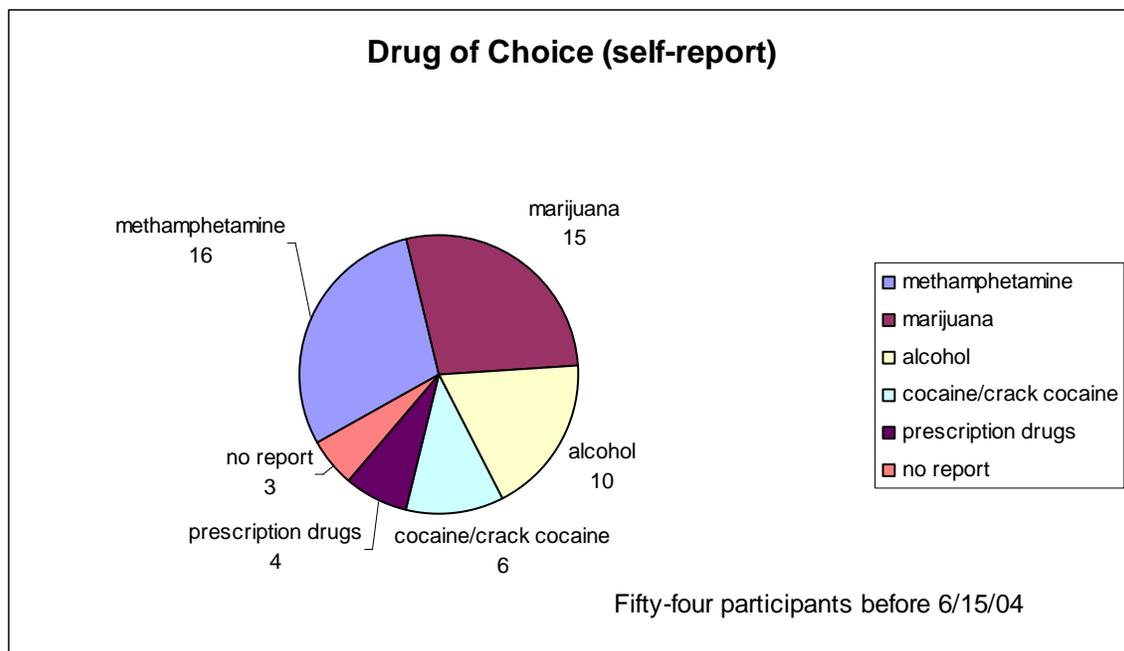
- The arrestee population has been roughly 75% men and 25% women.
- As the chart below shows, the percentage of women participating in drug court is higher than the percentage of women in the arrestee population. Further study should examine whether this is the case in other jurisdictions and what accounts for this difference.



- Data on the ages of arrestees is not readily available, but the next chart shows that the Stearns County Drug Court serves a wide-range of ages.



❖ Stearns County residents have three main drugs of choice: methamphetamine, marijuana, and crack cocaine. In addition, alcohol abuse has been an historic difficulty. Methamphetamine use and manufacturing has increased to the degree that the local drug task force now estimates that ninety percent of its caseload is focused on methamphetamine investigations. Additionally, marijuana use continues to stay steady among all age groups and there is some abuse of prescription drugs.



- Participants in Stearns County Drug Court report use of all of these drugs.

- ❖ In addition, Stearns County Court statistics shows that there has been a steady increase in the number of drug-related felonies. The Stearns County pilot drug court program was a response to Stearns County’s nearly 500 percent increase in felony drug convictions in the five years between 1996 and 2000. From 1999 to 2000 felony drug convictions in Stearns County nearly doubled – from 58 to 112. Furthermore, between 1996 and 2003, there has been an increase from 88 drug offenses filed with the court to 180. For each year of this period the number of drug related offenses filed with the court represented roughly 25 % of all new felony filings.

Key Component # 1: Drug courts integrate alcohol and other drug treatment services with justice system case processing.

- ❖ The Stearns County pilot drug court has a combined structure that allows three different ways to enter the program.
 - Track 1 is a “pre-plea” track for people who are newly arrested.
 - Track 2 allows for entry of persons whose criminal histories or criminal charges are outside the scope of the automatic entry in the pre-plea track. In the current pilot program, the prosecutor and defense counsel can agree to recommend admission of individuals whose charges or criminal history are at a severity level that would require mandatory commitment to prison under the sentencing guidelines.
 - Track 3 is a probation violation track allows for probation agents to recommend drug court supervision for offenders whose underlying charges

are eligible offenses and where the reasons for the revocation stem from an inability to remain abstinent.

- ❖ The Stearns County Drug Court Team brings together individuals from different agencies and disciplines. Team members are
 - Judge Paul Widick, District Judge
 - Brigid Murphy, Drug Court Coordinator
 - Mike Lieberg, Assistant County Attorney
 - Len Weiler, Assistant Public Defender
 - Mary Dachel, Assessment Agent, Stearns County Community Support Services
 - Joan Pierskalla, Assessment Agent, Stearns County Community Support Services
 - Chris Schill, Probation Agent, Stearns County Community Corrections
 - Stephanie Kroll, Surveillance Technician

- ❖ Length of the Program: The program is designed to last 12 to 18 months, depending on the participant's legal status and individual progress. Each participant must complete three program phases before commencement.
 - Phase I is a minimum of 90 days and emphasizes treatment. It requires:
 - ◆ nine to twelve random drug test per month and drug-free test results,
 - ◆ completion of primary treatment,
 - ◆ meetings with probation agent once per week,
 - ◆ compliance with program requirements,

- ◆ at least three review sessions with the judge per month, and
 - ◆ resolution of the legal case. (This final requirement for moving out of Phase I was established in January 2004. Initial practice permitted a move out of Phase I before the conclusion of the legal case.)
- Phase II lasts a minimum of 90 days and emphasizes the development of an aftercare program. It requires:
 - ◆ five to seven random drug tests per month and continued drug-free results,
 - ◆ enrollment in the recommended aftercare (Narcotics Anonymous, for example),
 - ◆ meeting with probation agent twice per month,
 - ◆ working or consistently utilizing the services of a work force center, school, or volunteering, and
 - ◆ at least two review sessions per month with the judge.
 - Phase III is a minimum of six months and emphasizes education and employment. It requires:
 - ◆ three to five random drug test per month and continued drug- free tests,
 - ◆ meeting with probation agent, once per month,
 - ◆ a monthly review session with the judge,
 - ◆ progress in reaching educational, employment, and housing goals, and

- ◆ completion of a community service project that the participant develops and implements with team approval.

❖ Case Processing:

- If in custody, defendant is arrested, charged, and appears in arraignment court within two business days of arrest. The prosecutor screens for charge eligibility, while the probation agent and coordinator review criminal history and residency for eligibility.
- If first appearance is by Summons and Complaint, the prosecution, probation agent and drug court coordinator complete preliminary screening and schedule an assessment prior to the first appearance.
- At the assessment and screening, other eligibility criteria are measured (chemically abusive/dependent and amenable to probation). The participant is given a confidentially waiver at the assessment to allow for the assessment results to be distributed to the team and the participant is informed about the drug court program by the probation agent.
- At the second appearance, the results from the assessment and the screening are conveyed to the team. The defendant is then informed regarding eligibility and the public defender discusses options with the client. If the defendant wishes to address legal issues, the omnibus hearing is set within three weeks. If not, the file is set for a settlement hearing in drug court within three weeks.
- Resolution of the case is dependent on the charge and entry track.

- The participant is allowed to address all legal issues, such as omnibus challenges, on a fast track basis, with hearings within three weeks of first appearance. Participants remain in phase I until resolution of the legal case.
- Resolution can consist of a stay of adjudication, stay of imposition, stay of execution, or dismissals. Those who receive a stay of adjudication are dismissed from any further probation, if they complete the program. Those who still have supervisory probation time left are referred to standard probation. Those who do not successfully complete the drug court program return to the regular criminal calendar for further case processing.

Assessment and Treatment:

- ❖ The Stearns County Human Services Adult Mental Health and Chemical Dependency Unit is responsible for completing chemical use assessments.
 - The chemical use assessment tool uses a holistic approach to review the client's life circumstance. The multi-dimensional tool covers events leading to the assessment, drug use patterns, physical and emotional health, family history, and employment issues. These factors assist the assessor in making a referral to an appropriate provider, some of whom specialize in areas such as dual diagnosis and gender specific issues.
- ❖ Stearns County pilot drug court uses the substance abuse treatment services of several providers.

Substance Abuse Primary Treatment Providers*

	Number Admitted	Number Dismissed	Number Successfully Completing Treatment	Number Who Left Drug Court Program before Completion
New Beginnings (inpatient; specialized Meth-track)	12	5	7	0
Recovery Plus/ St. Cloud Hospital (outpatient)	20	6	12	2
Central Minnesota Mental Health Clinic (outpatient)	6	1	5	0
Effective Living (outpatient)	10	2	8	0
Liberalis (outpatient—women only)	5	0	5	0
Bradley Center (inpatient)	1	1	0	0
VA Medical Center (outpatient)	2	0	2	0
River Place (inpatient)	2	0	2	0
Medallion (inpatient)	1	0	1	0

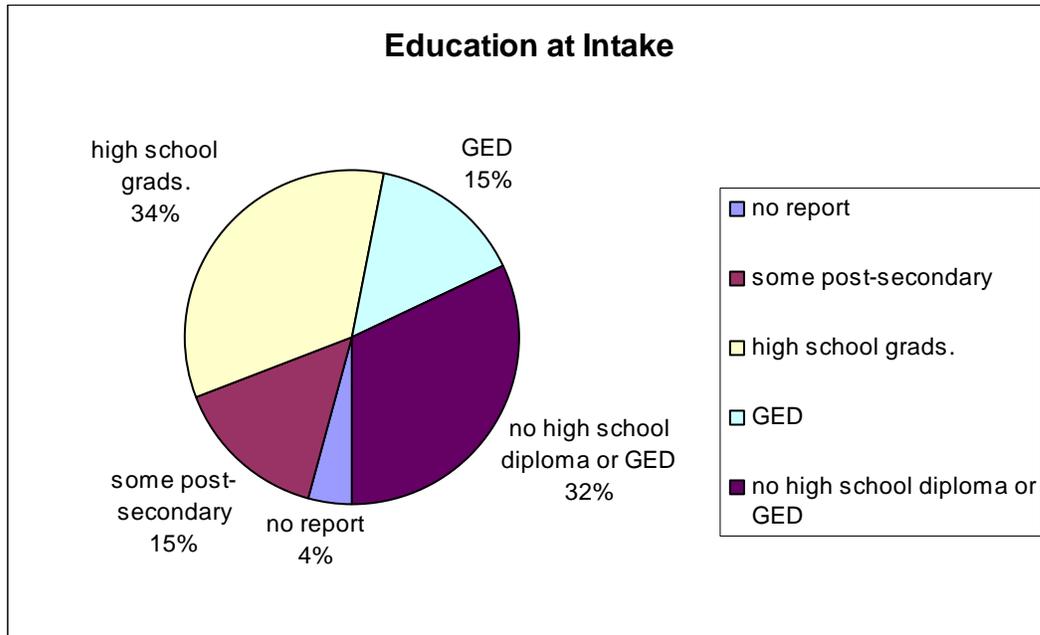
* Primary Treatment information provided for fifty-four drug court participants before 6/15/04. Total exceeds fifty-four because some participants who were dismissed by one provider received treatment from one or more other providers.

- New Beginnings has an in-patient methamphetamine track treatment program for both male and female meth users and up to ninety percent of meth users are referred to this program.
- One provider offers a women-only inpatient program.

- ❖ The drug court team monitors the success and effectiveness of each of these providers through frequent communication between the probation agent, the chemical use assessors and the treatment providers. All treatment plan modifications are forwarded to the drug court team and all treatment providers must have phase structures with specific benchmark requirements for progression from phase to phase. Each provider is required to send updated weekly progress reports regarding the drug court participants' attendance, urine test results and phase progression. These reports are sent to the probation agent and he reports this information at each weekly drug court staffing.

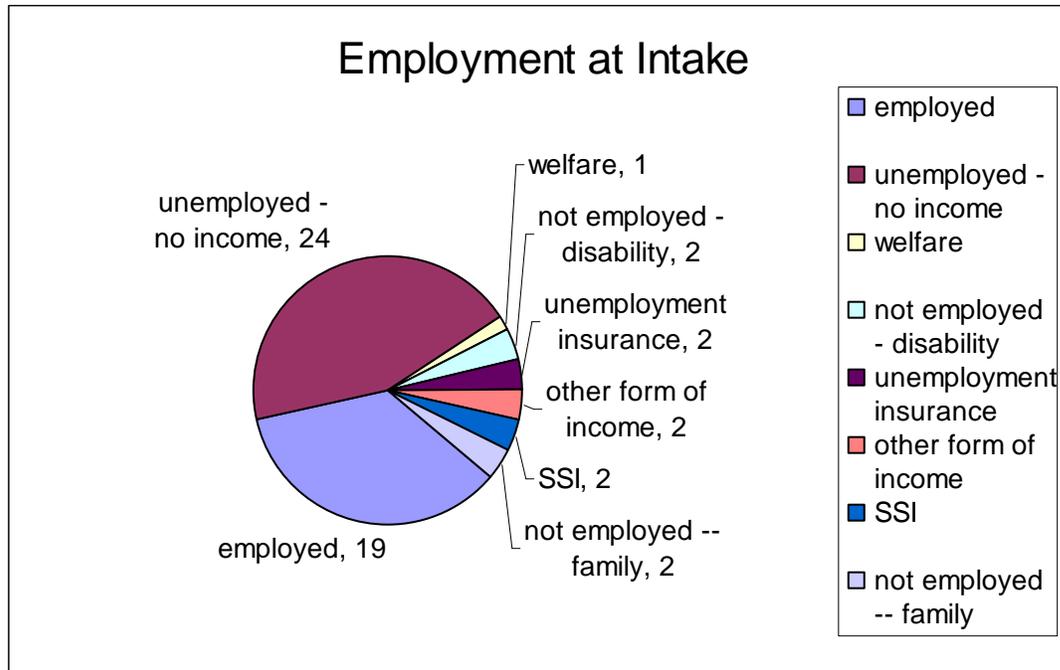
- ❖ Aftercare/Continuing Care Services: Aftercare plans are developed with the client during primary treatment. Services include continuing education and support through different phases of treatment, halfway house placement, extended care, individual counseling and psychiatric services. Aftercare activities are reported weekly to the court by the probation agent on attendance, progress, and needs. All participants are expected to attend AA/NA or an alternative support group approved by the court, and the court may order increased participation for individuals who have relapsed. Participants are expected to obtain and utilize a sponsor.

- ❖ Educational and Vocational Services: Expectations for GED completion are a part of the drug court phases. The drug court team assists participants in furthering their education and training.



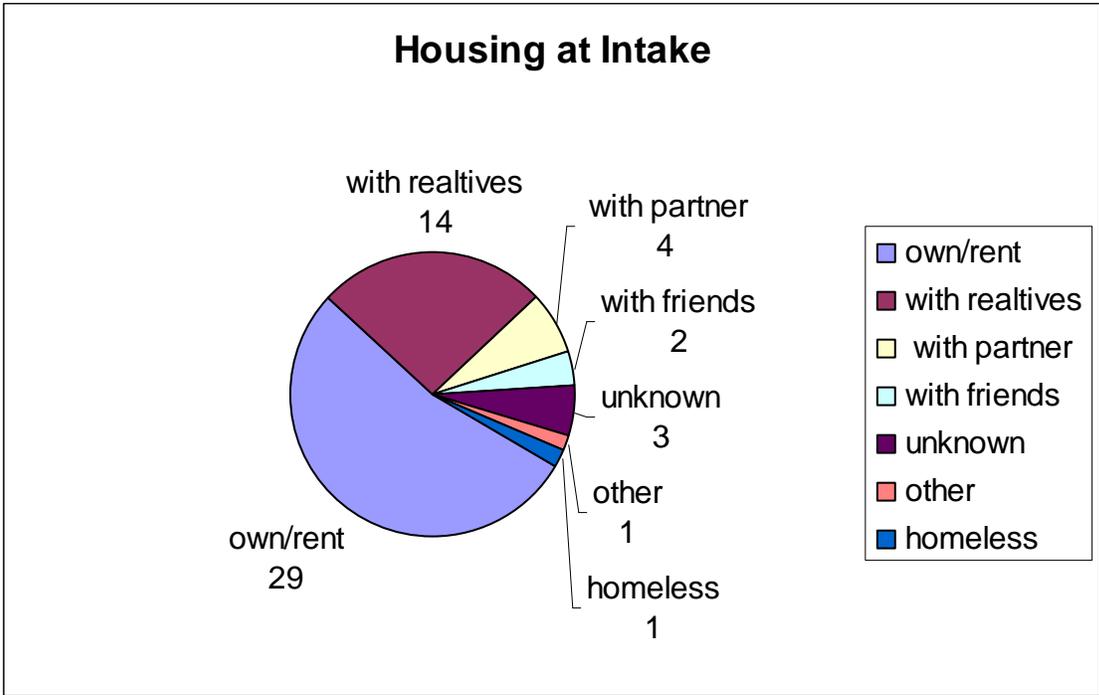
After more participants have graduated from drug court, a follow-up evaluation will examine the education level of drug court graduates and note whether there is improvement.

- ❖ Employment is also expected, and is monitored throughout the drug court phases. Participants are given job leads or referred to community resources such as the County Workforce Center, Rehab Services, and job fairs. Participants placed in a halfway house are required to pursue employment as part of the halfway house agreement.



After more participants have graduated from drug court, a follow-up evaluation will examine the employment level of drug court graduates and note whether there is improvement.

- ❖ Collateral Services: During the initial assessment, the evaluator will determine client needs for housing, employment, counseling, social contact, and family supports. Treatment providers will offer further evaluation and recommendations as the client completes primary treatment. The team will conduct in-home visits for needs assessment purposes after completion of the primary treatment. Clients are referred to Housing and Redevelopment Authority, Rehab Services, Tri-Cap Transportation, and financial programs within the county as needed.



Key Component #2: Using a nonadversarial approach, prosecution and defense counsel promote public safety while protecting participants’ due process rights.

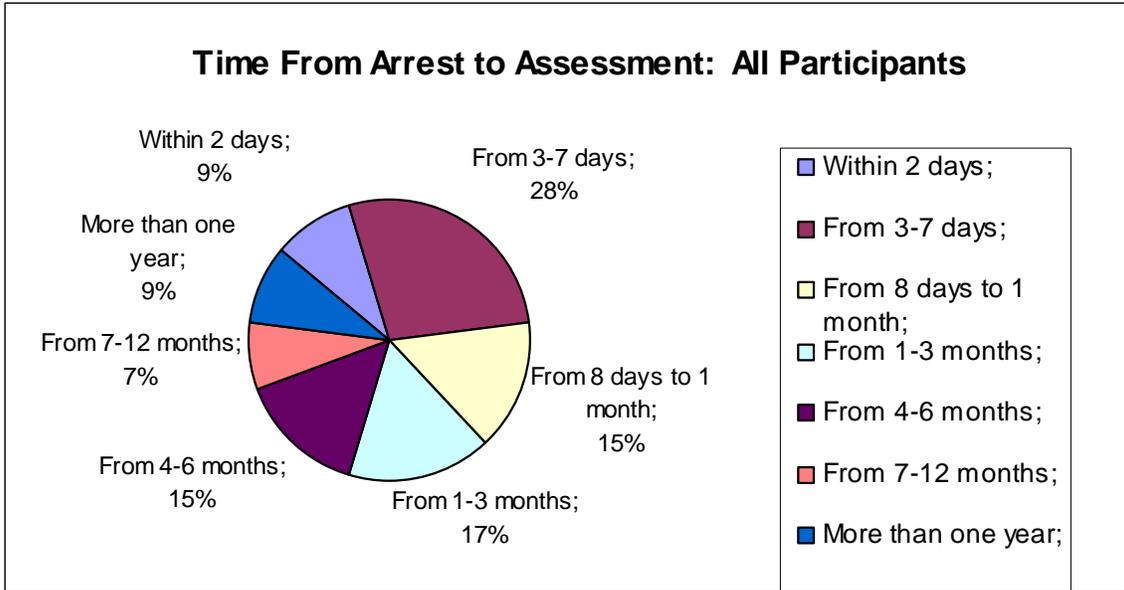
Among the most striking features of the Stearns County Drug Court is the level of cooperation that exists among team members. Leadership for the development of a drug court in Stearns County came from Judge Bernard Boland (who is currently on a leave of absence) and he has had support from the Stearns County Attorney and from the Office of Stearns County Public Defender. The person occupying the position of County Attorney has changed since drug court began, but the new County Attorney is supportive as well. The Public Defender sees drug court as an opportunity for clients to receive treatment that they need.

A future follow-up process evaluation will examine this issue more carefully by the systematic distribution of a questionnaire to drug court participants. The questionnaire will ask them their own view of whether they believe they were treated fairly and how well drug court protected their due process rights.

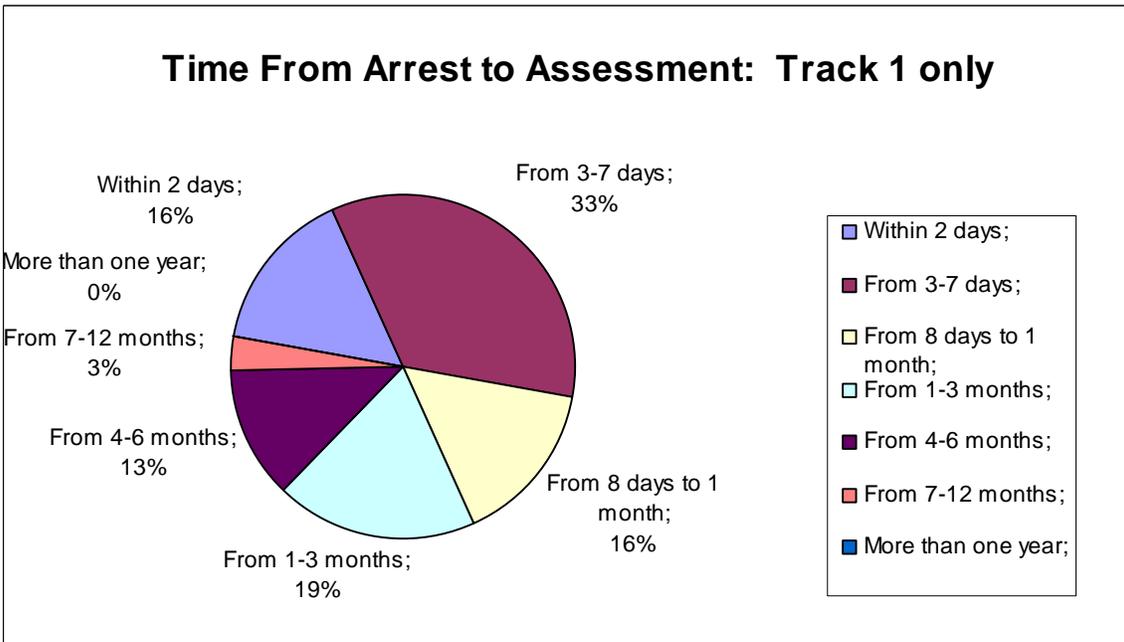
Key Component #3: Eligible participants are identified early and promptly placed in the drug court program.

A key element of drug courts is to take advantage of the shock of arrest as a time when someone who is drug dependent might make a commitment to change behavior. One of the weaknesses of the traditional handling of drug cases by courts is that, by the time a defendant's legal case is resolved, the defendant is less amenable to treatment.

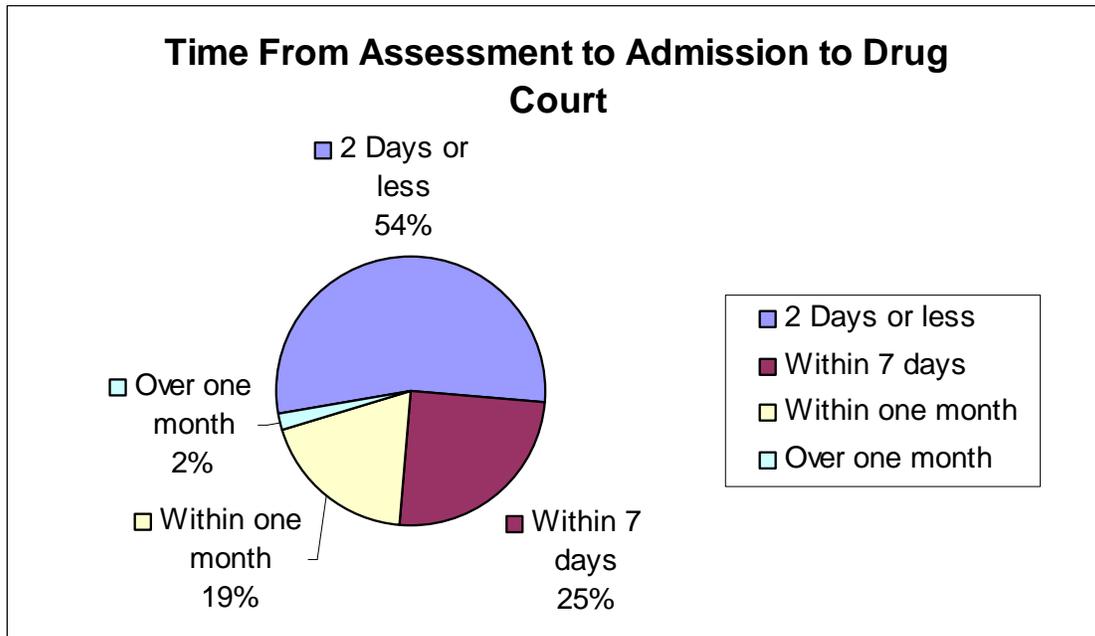
The Stearns County Drug Court Team has proposed a goal that 100% of eligible participants be assessed within two days of arrest. This goal, while laudable, is probably too ambitious. The next chart shows that only 20 of the 54 participants were assessed within one week. There are a couple explanations for this. First, participants who come to drug court through Tracks 2 and 3 (by agreement of the parties, or through probation violations) have typically had their arrests months earlier. For statistical purposes, these participants should be excluded from this goal. Second, there is frequently a significant time period between the arrest of a possible drug court participant and the filing of charges. Even with improved communication between the drug court staff and the county attorney's office, the goal should be revised downward.



The following chart includes only participants who entered drug court through Track 1 (“Pre-plea”). For these participants, who are most likely to be new arrests, nearly 50% are assessed within 7 days.



The following chart shows that once a potential drug court participant has been identified and assessed for chemical dependency, admission to drug court occurs quickly, with 79% admitted to drug court within seven days.



Key Component #4: Drug courts provide a continuum of alcohol, drug, and other related treatment and rehabilitation services.

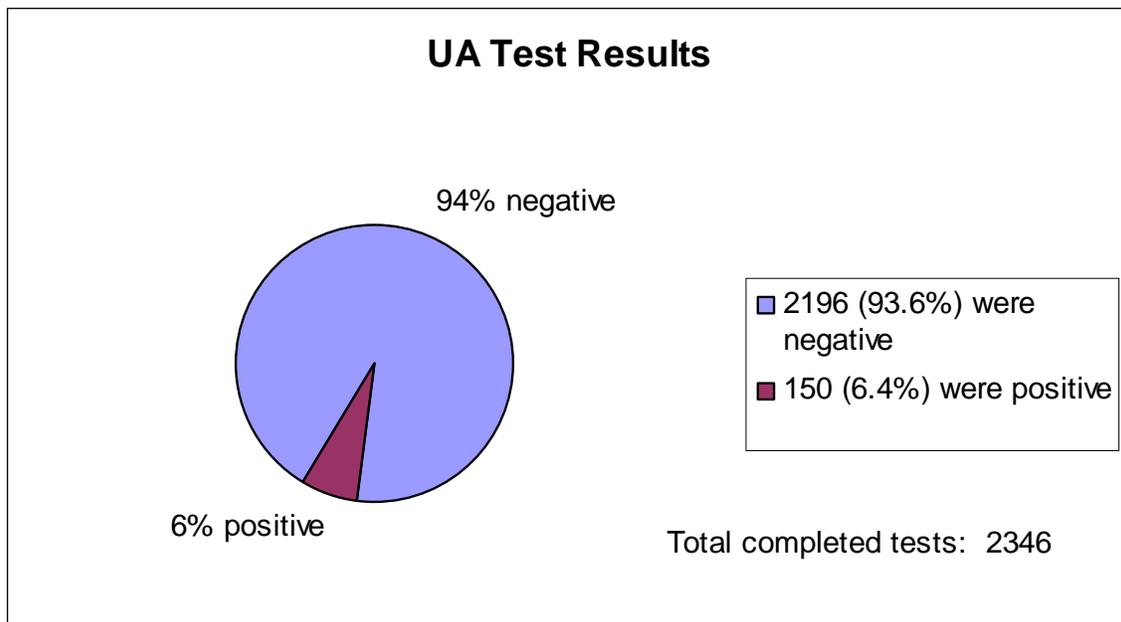
Discussed above under Key Component #1 – Assessment and Treatment.

Key Component #5: Abstinence is monitored by frequent alcohol and other drug testing.

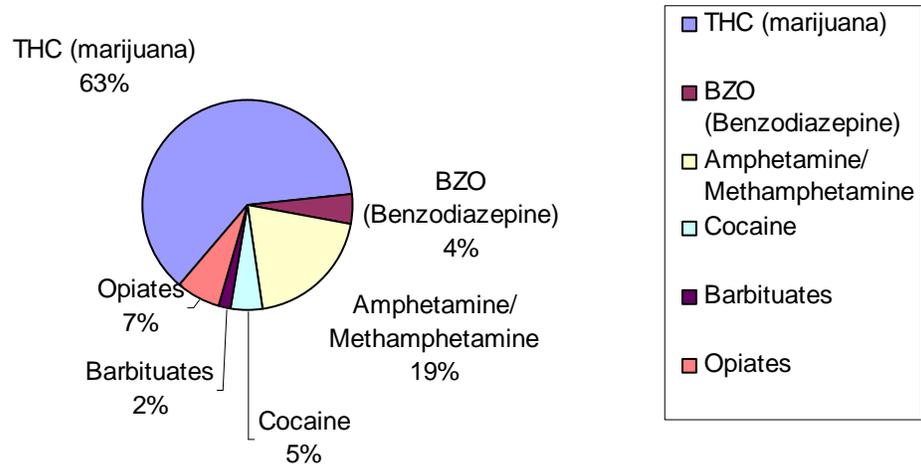
The Stearns County Drug Court philosophy is that frequent staff-administered random tests for drug or alcohol use are imperative in assisting the participant to obtain

abstinence. Phase I participants are tested between nine and twelve times per month, phase II between five and seven times per month, Phase III between three and five.

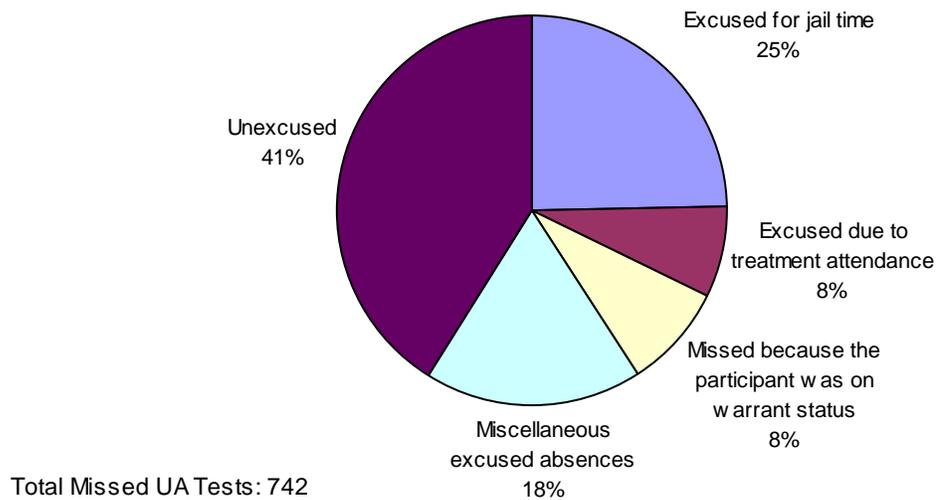
The Stearns County Drug Court Team has proposed, as an operational goal, that 80% of all urine analysis tests will be negative for drug use. As the chart below shows, that goal is being exceeded by a significant degree. An upwards adjustment of this goal is warranted.



Drugs Identified in Positive UA Results



Reasons for Missed UA Tests



Key Component #6: A coordinated strategy governs drug court responses to participants' compliance.

The drug court team meets and discusses the progress of each individual and develops a coordinated response to participant behavior just prior to every drug court session. The probation agent provides a report on the progress of each participant who is scheduled to appear during that afternoon's session. The report indicates the participant's drug court phase, the level of treatment the participant is currently receiving, all UA results to that date, and data on appearances at office appointments with the probation agent. Phase I participants are required to meet with the judge a minimum of three Fridays per month. Phase II participants must report for review hearings twice per month while Phase III participants report once per month. If the probation agent determines that a participant's actions require a review hearing prior to the next scheduled one for the participant's phase, the team requires the participant to appear at the scheduled hearing. After staffing, the team accompanies the judge to the courtroom and is present for the entire session.

Sanctions and Incentives

The judge relies on the prosecutor, public defender, probation agent, surveillance tech, assessors and coordinator to provide input into the development of the team's response to participant behaviors. Sanctions for behaviors like missed appointments with the probation agent, positive UA tests, or other program violations range in severity and include the following:

- verbal warning from the judge;

- requiring the participant to wait until the end of the court session before his/her case is addressed;
- requiring the participant to sit in the “jury box” in the court, so that he/she is singled out among the participants;
- a “re-set” within a phase, so the participant must begin that phase again, or a return to an earlier phase;
- jail time, usually a night or a weekend;
- termination from the program.

Incentives for positive behavior like completion of a GED, new employment, or phase changes include verbal praise from the judge and applause from fellow participants.

Among drug courts nationally, there appears to be a stronger use of tangible rewards for positive behavior than has been, in the past, the practice in Stearns County. In May 2004, the Stearns County Drug Court began the practice of collecting donated merchandise/service certificates for such things as a free cup of coffee at a local coffeehouse, a \$25 card for gasoline, and movie passes. These items are placed in a fishbowl and, during the first drug court session of each month, drug court participants with noteworthy accomplishments are allowed to choose one item from the fishbowl. Noteworthy accomplishments include phase changes; a participant’s one-year anniversary of sobriety; and designation by the drug court team as “participant of the month.” The inclusion of these tangible rewards is a valuable development in the Stearns County program.

Key Component #7: Ongoing judicial interaction with each drug court participant is essential.

Paul Widick, the current drug court judge and Bernard Boland, who served in that role earlier, have each been personally committed to the success of the drug court. The judge participates in all weekly staff meetings and hearings and uses team input to determine sanctions or incentives.

Key Component #8: Monitoring and evaluation measure the achievement of program goals and gauge effectiveness.

MIS Plan: The team has accessed the MIS system available from the *Justice Research Center* (JRC) for use by drug courts. The team uses the JRC program and forms to gather participants' personal, criminal and chemical use history prior to involvement with the drug court and the program incorporates data fields for demographic information on each drug court participant's age, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, and housing status, and criminal history. Data is also collected on the number of participants screened and accepted (and rejected and why); number and type of treatment services provided; time from arrest to time of evaluation; time from evaluation to first drug court appearance; time from arrest to entry to treatment access; treatment completion rates; length of time in each phase of drug court program; UA results; re-arrests while in program; number of terminations and reasons why; and changes in employment status, family status, and housing status while in program.

Follow-up Process Evaluation: The next phase in the Stearns County Drug Court’s plan of evaluation is a follow-up process evaluation. The follow-up process evaluation will provide updates on the issues presented in this preliminary process evaluation. The follow-up process evaluation will also begin to examine the drug court’s progress in achieving operational goals regarding the educational, employment, and housing goals of participants. Further, the follow-up process evaluation will include the results of surveys and interviews of drug court staff, participants, treatment providers, and community stakeholders. Information will be collected on the coordination and collaboration of all participating agencies prior to and after the drug court implementation and on the services available to the drug court from each agency. The follow-up process evaluation will assist the team and steering committee in decision making on the future direction and management of the program and will also provide summary information on the impact of the program on the participants’ lives.

Outcome Evaluation: After the Stearns County Drug Court has been in operation for at least another year, an outcome evaluation will focus on the drug court’s goal of enhancing public safety by reducing criminal recidivism.

Development of the outcome evaluation is ongoing. At present, the plan is to define recidivism similarly to how it was defined in the “Evaluation of the Hennepin County Drug Program” [Rebecca Ericson, Ph.D., principal investigator, et al., May 1999]. In that study, recidivism included 1) new felony charges; 2) new drug charges (at all levels); 3) new felony drug charges; 4) new felony-person charges; and 5) new misdemeanor convictions.

Recidivism rates will be collected for the participants, including failure and dropout rates, for all program participants and the comparison group for one, two and three years after completion or termination from the program. Recidivism will be monitored through the Stearns County Community Corrections reporting systems, the Statewide Supervision System and the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, each of which reports data on an individual basis. A follow-up survey will measure other post-program measures such as health, substance abuse, family status and education.

A comparison group will be drawn from Stearns County Community Corrections files dating from a three-year period prior to the advent of drug court. The outcome evaluation will determine if the identified group is sufficiently similar to the drug court treatment group on key demographic criteria. Intake information from these files will be compiled on the comparison group. Follow-up surveys will also be sent to both groups, coupled with incentives to complete the survey. Recidivism information will be collected on the comparison group in the same manner as the drug court participant group. The information gathered will be compared to the intended outcomes to see if the program is meeting expectations.

Goals and Objectives

The following are the goals and objectives that the drug court has set for itself:

- 1) Reduce substance abuse among criminal offenders.
 - a. 100% of possible participants assessed for chemical dependency within two business days of arrest or referral to drug court.

- b. 85% referred to a treatment program within two business days of the assessment.
70% of this group will be in treatment within a week of the referral.
 - c. 100% will complete primary treatment while in phase I of the program.
 - d. 95% of all participants will obtain a sponsor within the first phase of the program.
 - e. 80% of all urine analysis tests will be negative for drug use.
 - f. 70% graduation rate of all offenders admitted to the drug court program within 18 months of admission.
 - g. 100% of all graduates will have been drug free for 12 months at graduation.
- 2) Enhance public safety by reducing criminal recidivism.
- a. 75% will not be convicted of another offense while in the program.
 - b. 80% will be employed, in school, or volunteering while in phase III.
 - c. 80% will have a significant reduction of at least 6 points in risk and/or needs between initial entry assessment and the discharge assessment as measured by the LSI-R.
 - d. 70% of all participants will not be convicted of another offense 1 year after graduation.
- 3) Assist Offenders in developing personal, family and social skills and relationships to become more productive citizens.
- a. 75% will be referred for education and/or employment services while in phase II of the program.
 - b. 80% participants will report improvements in their familial and personal relationships.

- c. 70% of all participants in need of therapy or mental health services will obtain the services while in the program.
- d. 90% will have obtained employment or be enrolled in school at the time of graduation.

Key Component #9: Continuing interdisciplinary education promotes effective drug court planning, implementation, and operations.

All Stearns County Drug Court Team members have participated in a three-part U.S. Justice Department funded training program for drug court development. In addition, Judge Bernard Boland attended the National Drug Court Institute's weeklong training specifically developed for judges. Probation Agent Chris Schill and Coordinator Brigid Murphy have also attended weeklong training geared to their specific roles in drug court. Other training that team members have attended include the National Association of Drug Court Professional Training Conferences in every year since inception of the Stearns County drug court and statewide training for both operational courts and those in development in Minnesota.

Key Component #10: Forging partnerships among drug courts, public agencies, and community-based organizations generates local support and enhances drug court effectiveness.

The Stearns County Drug Court Steering Committee membership includes representatives of the judicial system, law enforcement, corrections, and county human services.

Paul Widick, District Court Judge
Janelle Kendall, Stearns County Attorney
Matt Quinn, Chief Deputy Assistant Stearns County Attorney
Beverly Altstatt- Mental Health/C.D. Unit Supervision
Janet Reigstad – Director, Community Support Division of Stearns County Human
Services
Kelly Simondet - Sergeant St. Cloud Police
Dave LeBeau - Head of the Central Minnesota Gang Strike Force
John Moosbrugger - Chief Public Defender , Seventh District
Mark Sizer – Director, Community Corrections Division of Stearns County
Human Services
John Sanner, Stearns County Sheriff
Brigid Murphy, Stearns County Drug Court Coordinator

Conclusions and recommendations:

The Stearns County Drug Court Program, in its first two years of operation, has effectively developed procedures that comply with all ten of the defined key components of a drug court. The drug court team shows a high level of dedication and professionalism in setting goals, developing the program, and following procedures.

The above report identifies two areas where the operating procedures of the drug court might be improved.

- Drug courts, as an alternative to traditional adjudication, take advantage of the time following the shock of arrest to begin substance abuse treatment. In the first two years of operation, participants have been admitted to drug court with widely different times since arrest. Some of the explanation for this is that some participants enter drug court because of a probation violation (Track 3). But the time between arrest and drug court admission for Track 1 participants varies as well. Steps should be taken to clarify the process by which a case is referred to drug court.

- The Stearns County Drug Court has only recently begun the use of tangible rewards (such as movie tickets) to recognize positive changes in participant behavior. The use of incentives like this is common in drug court programs nationally and should be continued.

Other recommendations are focused on data collection, to lay the foundation for a follow-up process evaluation and an outcome evaluation.

- Drug court participants should be surveyed to gather their views about the fairness of drug court and their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the drug court program.
- Treatment providers and community stakeholders should be surveyed to gather their perspectives on the present operation of and knowledge about the drug court.
- A comparison group of people arrested for similar drug crimes in Stearns County, before the advent of drug court, should be identified from Stearns County Community Corrections files. Steps to gather key demographic data and recidivism information on this group should begin.