

DHS Director Marc Cherna recently received an anonymous testimonial that serves as a reminder that the work that so many in DHS do affects the real lives of real people. DHS NEWS has taken the liberty of reprinting the testimony in its entirety.

For at least 10 years, study after study has shown that problem-solving courts not only improve outcomes, but also save a significant amount of money. The body of research has finally hit such a critical mass that most police departments – which have often seen these programs as giving a pass to offenders – have given these programs their unequivocal support.

This, however, is not a position paper. This is one person's story – my story – about how one problem-solving court – Allegheny County Mental Health Court – saved one life.

The broad outline of the case that brought me to MHC is as follows: I was arrested in March of 2005 following a police chase. I was charged with a raft of offenses ranging from fleeing and attempting to elude the police to aggravated assault to possession with intent to distribute. At the point when this occurred, I was in treatment for opiate addiction at a methadone clinic; I was not on medication for my bipolar disorder, and I was abusing other drugs. It can only be attributed to a miracle that no one was injured in the course of the chase. Unfortunately, the incident received some attention from the local media due to the video footage captured by the police cruiser cameras.

The entire event was a desperate act and my risk of suicide was recognized at the Allegheny County Jail. I was initially placed on an acute mental health pod and received surprisingly comprehensive psychiatric services as well as a referral to what was then called the Allegheny County Forensic Diversion Program. After two months in jail, I was placed in a rehab (Pyramid Altoona) followed by a halfway house (Gateway's Tom Rutter House).

Mental Health Court – a relatively small, new program that I was unaware of – was presented as a potential option by my attorney. My acceptance into the program was far from assured: the nature of some of my charges – as well as the media attention paid to my case – placed me outside of several of MHC's acceptance criteria. Quite fortunately for me, a combination of factors – not the least of which was my compliance and progress in the year between offense and trial – led the DA and the court to take a change, exercise some discretion and flexibility, and accept my case into MHC.

I wish that I could end the story with a “happily ever after” at this point. But if my story ended there I would not be able to testify to the true commitment, support and ultimate success of MHC.

Recovery from mental health and substance abuse problems is not a linear process. I was 28 when I entered MHC, and I had been struggling with both for my entire adult life. The raised and dashed hopes and wasted potential of my life had disillusioned and estranged my family and friends. At the very outset of my involvement with the courts, my only encouragement and support came from the professionals from JRS and MHC.

After staying clean and in treatment for dual disorders for about a year, I relapsed. What followed my relapse was the most difficult, discouraging and painful year of my life. During that year, I was placed in three rehab programs – each of which I completed. However, I continued to struggle and accrued several new misdemeanor cases. In the end, I was so

defeated that I had given up on myself and my prospects for ever leading a normal life. I had become all but resigned to a short life alternating between incarceration and addiction.

In my mind, there was no hope of disrupting the downward spiral in my life. After the progress that I had made initially- completing treatment, returning to professional employment, regaining the trust and support of my friends and family – I had backslid into a worse situation than I was in initially.

However, throughout this entire time, I attended review hearings. I received encouragement from Judge Zottola, from my JRS liaison, and from the entire MHC team. I also got to see firsthand the diverse array of defendants; I saw their charges, their sentences, their treatment and their outcomes. Of course, I have no way of knowing the exact details of each person's case. I saw some people be returned to treatment, some returned to jail, and some restored to productive, happy lives.

What I was seeing was true problem-solving in action. I understand now that the diverse tactics that I saw as I would sit in the MHC courtroom represented exactly what makes a program like this work. It only works when committed, passionate professionals work together with the resources, discretion and flexibility to look at each person not as a case number but as an individual. What I saw was a system that matched effort on the part of the client with support on the part of the team. What I saw was a system that recognized the difficult nature of its undertaking and the seemingly dismal odds against which they operated. But most importantly, I saw people who knew that what they were doing was worthwhile.

When this collaborative approach works, it can produce miraculous change in the lives of people like me. The pivotal moment for me came when MHC decided reluctantly to put out a warrant for my arrest. I had repeatedly failed to contact my probation officer or my JRS liaison and these people both knew me well enough to see that I was at-risk in multiple ways. It didn't seem that way to me at the time, but their intent was in no way punitive. I spent three weeks in jail while the MHC team put together another game plan for me. I will never forget how I felt when I appeared in Judge Zottola's courtroom in county reds and shackles.

He looked at me and said, "J., I'm very disappointed in you."

Those words cut me, because Judge Zottola knew me and cared about me enough to be disappointed.

I replied, "Not nearly as disappointed as I am in myself."

That moment turned out to be a turning point in my life. In spite of the fact that I felt that all of MHC's effort had been wasted on me, they made the decision to make one last, best effort. Coincidentally, at the same time, my JRS liaison – who had always been highly committed to my case – was replaced by one who was an even more passionate and hands-on advocate. The commitment that I saw her demonstrate to all her clients was infectious. I now look back and see that all the effort, setbacks, false starts and tentative progress led toward something.

With constant support and supervision, I have made astonishing progress in the past year. I worked my way through a full continuum of treatment; from residential rehabilitation through supervised living into my own apartment. I have a job in my field. I have taken responsibility for my own recovery from dual disorders and have gradually come to need

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fewer and fewer supportive services. In short, I have made an incredibly long journey to a healthy, happy, productive life.

While I was incarcerated, I saw that the vast majority of inmates in the Allegheny County Jail were languishing for months or years on probation-related issues. I felt so incredibly fortunate to know that I had the advocacy of Mental Health Court working on my side. Practically every inmate I encountered could benefit from the opportunities that problem-solving courts can provide.

The reality is that not everyone will make the kind of turnaround that I have made. Like I said at the beginning, this is by no measure a linear process. There's no guarantee that any given intervention will work. But the success of problem-solving courts has been indisputably proven by both research and by the anecdotal evidence of cases like mine. But they only work when they have the resources – human, economic and judicial – to do so. These programs have an amazing and unlikely combination of benefits: they produce cost savings to law enforcement, the courts, and society at large, and in the process they can produce amazing life-improving results for seemingly hopeless cases – like mine.