

Substance Abuse and Criminal Justice:
Alabama's Court Referral Programs,
A Successful Model for Rehabilitating Offenders

Institute for Court Management
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Phase III Project
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Martin A. Ramsay
Administrative Office of Courts
300 Dexter Avenue
Montgomery, Alabama 36130

Abstract

This project seeks to address the effectiveness of the Alabama Court Referral Officer (CRO) and Court Referral Education Programs and whether they have been successful in reducing recidivism among substance abusing offenders who come in contact with the criminal justice system.

The relative questions to be reviewed:

1. Are court-managed substance abuse programs effective?
2. Is recidivism lower among those who attend court-ordered substance abuse programs versus those who are not required to attend programs?
3. Are current substance abuse services effective?
4. What are the variables between offenders receiving substance abuse services versus those offenders not receiving services?
5. What are the advantages, if any, of the Court Referral Officer and Court Referral Education Programs being a direct component of the statewide court system?
6. What are the disadvantages to the program?

The significance of the Court Referral Programs to courts is simple: A well-coordinated substance abuse program, in conjunction with a proactive court system, aids greatly in the reduction of recidivism among the alcohol and drug abusing population, the largest population in the court system.

The research methodology relied primarily on surveys with differing collection methods. The initial questionnaire/survey was provided to judges in 20 of the state's 40 Judicial Circuits. The first survey was conducted with responder units (*1). The judges were surveyed at the Annual Circuit and District Judges Conference [**Appendix A, Judges Survey, Slide #001-021**]. There were ultimately three surveys conducted among stakeholders (Judges [**Appendix B, Judges Survey**] CRO-referred

defendants [**Appendix C**, CRO Survey], and defendants not ordered to the CRO [**Appendix D**, Non-CRO Survey]).

The project focused upon 10 Judicial Circuits (5 rural and 5 urban areas). A second survey of 400 defendants in the 10 circuits (40 each circuit) who participated in court-managed substance abuse programs through the Court Referral Officer (CRO) Program was conducted through the mail. Lastly, a survey of 100 defendants who had not participated in court-managed substance abuse programs occurred. These individuals were identified through the Administrative Office of Courts mainframe computer which is the central repository for information on state court cases.


The CRO Program, coupled with the Court Referral Education Programs, has consistently provided quality substance abuse programming to defendants coming before state and municipal courts. The results of this project continue to bear this out.

The emphasis of this project was to determine whether or not these court-operated substance abuse programs are effective. A review of the surveys (Judges and CRO) indicate that the programs are successful. A review of the Non-CRO defendants indicates higher recidivism, less sobriety, and higher prior arrest histories.

The surveys confirmed high "user-satisfaction" with the CRO program by judges and CRO-referred defendants regarding the objectives of the survey. The project sought to address the effectiveness of the Alabama Court Referral Officer (CRO) and Court Referral Education Programs and whether they have been successful in reducing recidivism among substance abusing offenders who come in contact with the criminal justice system.

The recommendation for the continued success of this program is to continue to develop the statewide program by placing an adequate number of Court Referral Officers throughout the state in order to serve the 400+ circuit, district, municipal, and juvenile courts. The Administrative Office of Courts should continue to develop education programs for substance abuse offenders and the court system should retain authority and responsibility for these programs.

(*1) Reply Wireless Response Systems, manufactured by Fleetwood Group. Reply Wireless Systems manufacturer of portable response systems.

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