

CSAC Challenge Award Entry 2017 – Overview: Santa Clara County Adult Probation Wellness Unit

Overview: Probation Officers in the Wellness Unit offer nine, weekly peer support and cognitive therapy groups to support clients faced with mental illness and substance use disorders.

Challenge: In 1995, probation officers and judges working with the severely mentally ill noticed defendants who were being dismissed by the court often had difficulty transitioning into the community without support. Clients also had a wealth of experience from their time in treatment court, and that knowledge about how to succeed was being lost.

Innovative Solution: From this need, the idea arose for Deputy Probation Officers to facilitate peer support groups for current and former mental health and dual diagnosis clients. Thus, was born the *Family of Friends*, a weekly gathering in which lunch was served, participants checked in with each other, shared experiences, offered each other help, and supported one another. Since then, the program has grown to nine, weekly groups, including: Family of Friends peer support, gender specific, cognitive therapy – including Moral Reconciliation Therapy, and trauma .

Originality: Groups are open to all, facilitated by Probation Officers and retired Probation Officer volunteers, and donated food is served. Though *Family of Friends* started as a non-traditional role for Probation Officers, it has been widely accepted by defendants who often report they look forward to the weekly gatherings and that participation in the groups has changed their lives for the good.

Cost Effectiveness: MRT is an evidence based program shown to reduce recidivism by as much as 30% - 50% for periods up to 20 years. Peer support groups have been shown to be best practices. Groups are free of charge, open to anyone with an emphasis on assisting justice involved clients, and are held at Grace Community Center, a location in central downtown San Jose that is convenient for participants to reach. Lowered recidivism leads to cost savings for the county, courts and emergency rooms! The Probation Department now has two deputies working out of this downtown office fulltime. We partner with the City of San Jose, which offers complimentary services to mentally ill and homeless adults in an

office next door at Grace Center. A 2013 study by United States Courts (www.uscourts.gov), calculated the cost for one probation client to be supervised as \$3,347 per year. Based on this estimate, these groups have saved the County of Santa Clara County over eight million dollars, simply by using a practice that is likely to have better outcomes for clients, builds staff moral and is a more appropriate intervention than formal probation.

Results: Yearly participation is now at over 2,500 attendees! In addition to weekly gatherings, special events are held: The Summer BBQ, Holiday Lunch and Coat Distribution, Safe Sex Seminar, Healthy Food Choice classes, and several softball games with probation officers and clients. Weekly groups include: ***Family of Friends Peer Support, Men's Group, Women's Group, Moral Reconciliation Therapy - MRT (Men's Trauma, Women, Women's Trauma, and Veterans), Thinking Errors and Three Principles.***

The practice of Probation Officer facilitated peer support and cognitive therapy groups can be replicated by other jurisdictions. The co-founder of MRT, Dr. Kenneth Robinson, visited our groups, was pleased with our efforts, and now shares and promotes this with other agencies.

All Wellness Unit Probation Officers provide support and supervision for adults on probation with serious mental illnesses: Assist clients' adherence with Court orders; connect them to services; help other probation officers; relay progress information to the Court. Working with the whole person and their family/friends, we help them develop skills and recovery plans to maintain their mental and physical health and refrain from further involvement in the criminal justice system. The strong alliance created between clients and probation officers makes clients more likely to consult probation officers even after dismissal, allowing deputies to assist them during crisis. All of these efforts lead to lowered recidivism, and consequently, cost savings to the community.

One client said: "Family of Friends is an amazing resource in San Jose. It provides a happy, healthy environment for many recovering individuals. It is essential to keeping me whole." Julianne M.

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