

Jersey County Drug Court Named One Of Best Rural Justice Projects In Nation

by Submitted by Jersey County
December 5 2023 10:38 AM



JERSEY COUNTY - The Jersey County Drug Court program was named one of the best rural justice projects in the nation and selected to serve as an example for other rural communities to follow Jerseyville.

The Rural Justice Collaborative (RJC) Advisory Council has selected Jersey County Drug Court Program in Jerseyville – Jersey County as one of six new Rural Justice

Innovation Sites. These are the country's most innovative rural justice programs which will serve as models for other communities. The RJC initiative will provide resources to enable other communities to replicate these Innovation Sites' successes.

"Rural community leaders often don't have the resources to develop programs from scratch but we know that many rural justice leaders, like those from Jersey County Drug Court have found innovative solutions to their complex problems. Before this, there has been no nationally concerted effort for justice leaders and their collaborators in other sectors to share what they know. The Innovation Sites provide a framework that others can build from," said Tara Kunkel, Executive Director of Rulo Strategies, which organized the RJC in partnership with the National Center for State Courts (NCSC). About the Jersey County Drug Court Program In 2002, the late Honorable Judge Thomas Russell, along with other members in the Jersey County Court system and county board teamed up to develop one of the many problem-solving courts across the state and country. After nearly 12 years, the program is still thriving and stronger than ever. Problem-solving courts differ from traditional courts as they focus on a specific type of offense or person who has committed the offense. In Jersey County, the focus is on individuals who have a substance use disorder that has led them to commit criminal offenses.

The Jersey County Drug Court Program is a community partnership between the Circuit Judge, State's Attorney, Public Defender's Office, Circuit Clerk, Probation Department, Koen Counseling and Wellness, and local law enforcement. The program is a treatment-based alternative to incarceration for individuals who enter the judicial system as a result of addiction.

Through a non-adversial approach, combined with intensive, judicially monitored treatment program, the program offers individuals the opportunity to restore themselves as productive members of society. A recent graduate from the program made this statement: "I had been arrested and in Jersey County Jail 23 times. For me to turn everything around and be able to live a clean and sober life is by the grace of God. With hard work and dedication, it can be done, it is all on you. I lived a life of destruction and life of chaos for so many years, that it was all I knew. When they offered me drug court, I said to just send me to prison. My current probation officer looked at me and said "we're not sending you to prison, you are going to do this program."

"I didn't want to, but she told me that I was going to do it, so I decided to give it a shot. It was not easy, it was rough – it was a struggle in the beginning. Today, I can honestly say I am happy and content. When I was using, I was not happy and I was not content. I didn't know it at first, when I started the program, but this program was exactly what I needed and it saved my life."

Jersey County Drug Court Program Mission Statement: “The mission of the Jersey County Drug Court is to protect society by reducing criminal recidivism by using evidence-based practices, while helping participants rebuild their family lives and become productive citizens. Our program emphasizes a drug-free lifestyle and the development of coping mechanisms in stressful situations by addressing the participant’s related psychological, social and family issues through substance abuse treatment and mental health treatment.”

Leading By Example Over the next year, the RJC will work with Jersey County Drug Court to create educational materials that it will feature in an online resource center. Thanks to funding from SJI, the program will also offer visits to leaders from other communities and participate in regional conferences. “The RJC will provide a vast knowledge pool filled with actionable content which individual communities may not have the resources to compile on their own,” said Kristina Bryant of Rulo Strategies. About the Rural Justice Collaborative The RJC showcases the strengths of rural communities and highlights the cross-sector collaboration that is a hallmark of rural justice systems.

The work under the RJC is supported by a cross-sector advisory council composed of rural judges along with additional stakeholders in the justice, child welfare, behavioral health, and public health systems. The advisory council is guiding the multi-year initiative and identifying innovative programs and practices.

The RJC priority focus areas are:

- ? Increasing access to behavioral health treatment
 - ? Reducing victimization
 - ? Facilitating employment/educational opportunities for justice-involved individuals
 - ? Eliminating barriers of access to justice
 - ? Reducing incarceration
 - ? Facilitating reentry
 - ? Reducing the number of children in foster care due to substance use disorders
- About the National Center for State Courts The National Center for State Courts, headquartered in Williamsburg, Va., is a nonprofit court organization dedicated to improving the administration of justice by providing leadership and service to the state courts.

Founded in 1971 by the Conference of Chief Justices and Chief Justice of the United States Warren E. Burger, NCSC provides education, training, technology, management, and research services to the nation's state courts. Learn more at ncsc.org. About Rulo Strategies Rulo Strategies is a woman-owned business focused on supporting and evaluating initiatives designed to foster collaboration between diverse stakeholders with distinct but complementary missions.

Founder Tara Kunkel served as a Senior Policy Advisor to the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) where she advised on the policy direction of all opioid-related and overdose prevention initiatives. Learn more at rulostrategies.com. About the State Justice Institute The State Justice Institute (SJI) was established by federal law in 1984 to award grants to improve the quality of justice in state courts, and foster innovative, efficient solutions to common issues faced by all courts. SJI is a non-profit corporation governed by an 11-member Board of Directors appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. Learn more at sji.gov.