

Family Wellness Court

RENAYE JOHNSON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Santa Clara County has a Drug Dependency Court that has been in existence for over 10 years. Santa Clara County was awarded a federal grant to implement a Family Wellness Court that addresses families with children between the ages of 0 and 3 years old. The Family Wellness Court brings service providers together to review cases, address issues and support families in their reunification. The Family Wellness Court has been in existence since March 14, 2008.

Santa Clara County used part of their grant to fund an evaluation of the Family Wellness Court. An evaluation of the first two years of this court has impressive results. Although the sample is small, 71% of the children reunified with one or both parents.

It is recommended that Alameda County consider the results of the Family Wellness Court in Santa Clara County. It is also recommended that Alameda County consider implementing a similar drug dependency court.

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Introduction

How do you work with a family in which a parent has a serious drug addiction and their main concern is reunification with their child? How does a parent follow a detailed case plan while going through withdrawals? When children 0 to 3 years old are at-risk and the courts have become involved, how do you ensure that the family stays intact and healthy through these important developmental years? Santa Clara County created a proposal for a Family Wellness Court and was awarded a 3.7 million dollar federal grant for a 5-year pilot program. This program brought together the main stakeholders who would be working with families who were involved in the Drug Dependency Courts and who had a child between the ages of 0 and 3 years old. In the program, representatives with expertise from different agencies have the opportunity to discuss a family's case and what is expected of the parent between court appearances. Efforts are made to address all of these expectations, while supporting the parent as they accomplish these goals. It becomes a joint effort and there is an increased success rate.

When I was able to choose a BASSC project, I was drawn to the Family Wellness Court. Many of the families we work with in the Alameda County Social Services Agency face barriers to success because of drug or alcohol addictions. I found it encouraging that Santa Clara County had a Family Wellness Court, and I wanted to know more. I also wanted to see if some of these practices may be useful to implement in Alameda County. Our county already has some wonderful programs in place through the work that has been done in Children and Family Services, Welfare-to-Work and Behavioral Health Care Services. My recommendation is that we take a look at the Family Wellness Court program to see how the

practices could be helpful to the families in Alameda County.

A goal in the Family Wellness Court is to promote opportunities for success for families with children between the ages of 0 and 3 years old. This court seems to expect success from parents and puts many supports in place to reach this goal. I was impressed at the commitment of the different agencies toward this effort. The results proved to be worth the effort.

The families in this court have prior or current involvement across many agencies. Families are involved with: Drug Dependency Court, Criminal Court, Protective Services, Recovery Services, Mentoring, Eligibility for Benefits, Welfare-to-Work, and Public Health. The families are everyone's clients, and there is a commitment from all of the agencies to keep the families healthy and successful. Another goal of this collaboration is to look at how funding can be "braided and blended" to maximize dollars and ensure this program will be self-sustaining after the 5-year grant ends.

Observations of the Family Wellness Court

On March 29, 2011, I observed the Family Wellness Court in Santa Clara County. The Honorable Erica R. Yew presides over this court and has been involved with this court since grant funds were received in October 2007. The program was implemented on March 14, 2008. I had the opportunity to observe the case review process before court was in session, as well as the formal proceedings. Judge Yew's courtroom is focused on supporting the parents of families with children who are 0 to 3 years old, while their parents attempt to stay clean and sober and keep their family together and healthy.

The courtroom itself is warm and family-oriented. There is a play area for children, stickers on

the wall that could be moved, and colored pencils for older children. There is a wall with pictures of children who have been active in this court process (the pictures were donated by their parents).

Judge Yew ensures that everyone in her courtroom is introduced and encouraged to take part in the discussion regarding the progress of the participants. Parents are given the opportunity to express what is working or not working and why. With so many representatives from county agencies, there seems to be a way to resolve almost anything.

On the day of my visit, there was representation from several agencies, including: Behavioral Health Care; Home Visitation; attorneys for the parent, child and social workers; Domestic Violence Resources; Intervention Collaborative Mental Health; Drug and Alcohol Recovery; an eligibility worker for CalWORKS and General Assistance; child advocates; and a Liaison from the Department of Family and Children Services. There were several reports of dental work being completed and discussions of future housing orientation meetings.

The families in court on the day of my visit all seemed to be making progress. Some parents are at more advanced levels with 23 months clean and sober, while others recently just started to attend AA and NA meetings. Observing this process showed the amount of work a person would need to complete to keep their family together, including fulfilling: Family Wellness Court dates, criminal court dates, CalWORKS requirements, Welfare-to-Work requirements, social worker expectations, and mental health appointments. All of this is expected while parents are starting and staying clean and sober. It was apparent how frustrating it can be when parents are trying to reach workers and keep appointments that may be scheduled for the same day. This group sorted through these requirements and created an individual reminder sheet that clearly stated what the parent needed to do to stay on task and report back successfully at the next Family Wellness Court date.

Judge Yew has a great understanding of the effort the parents in the court are making, and rewards them for their efforts. Parents can fill out a request

for items such as clothing for the children, baby seat covers, and diapers. If these items are available, she will give them to the parent that day. If they are not available, she gives them a list of resources where they may be able to get the items. Judge Yew also ensures that each child on the case gets a toy or game that is age-appropriate when they are leaving the courtroom. When a parent has accomplished his or her goals between court dates, they can choose a small item or a coupon to go toward a larger item from her glass “fishbowl.” Everyone was very focused on their work and if they had done enough to get something from the “fishbowl.”

Judge Yew also acknowledges positive changes and strengths that she has noticed in the courtroom. On several occasions during my visit, she pointed out the positive changes she had observed in parents’ behaviors, such as: being more assertive, expressing themselves, advocating for what they need, and discussing what therapy was working better and with whom. She also observed the children’s behavior and gave credit to the parents for the good parenting they were doing. Judge Yew also encouraged those people who were working with the parent to comment on changes they had observed. This group all seemed to be supportive. If they were pointing out something that had not been done, they made suggestions for the future so they could be more successful the next time they come to court.

If a parent doesn’t complete their goals, there is time for feedback and questions. The parent will not get an item from the “fishbowl” and the judge may give them a special assignment for the next court date, such as writing an essay about why they are not participating in reaching their goals and keeping their family together.

The Family Wellness Court for Infants and Toddlers targets pregnant women and parents with children who are between 0 and 3 years old, who have abused methamphetamine and other drugs, and whose children are in or at-risk of out-of-home placements. Santa Clara County was awarded a grant for 3.7 million dollars to be used over a 5-year period of time. This grant was one of 53 Federal

Regional Partnership Grants awarded by the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. Their grant will end in 2012; however, the Family Wellness Court has been so successful that they now have the support of the County Board of Supervisors. There is a commitment by the Oversight Committee to search for future funding. The agencies that are involved in the court have committed to do their part to ensure its future success. First 5 matched this grant funding, bringing the total funding for the project to 6.3 million dollars.

The current Family Wellness Court service providers are: Judge Erica Yew from the Juvenile Dependency Court; a Superior Court Resource Coordinator; a Substance Abuse Assessor from the Department of Alcohol and Drug Services; the social workers assigned to the cases; attorneys and paralegals representing parents; attorneys representing children; attorneys representing social workers/County counsel; four Mentor Mothers; two Mentor Fathers; a Domestic Violence Resource Representative; a First 5 Santa Clara County Program Specialist; First 5 home visitors (Friends Outside, EMQ, Gardner and Public Health Nursing); a representative from a child advocate program (CASA); a Courtroom Clerk; an Early Childhood Mental Health Specialist; mental health therapists for parents; a social worker liaison; and, an eligibility worker.

The services provided while a person is participating in this court are supportive to both parents and their children. They assist in a parent's recovery and address the overall health of the family. They address the barriers and needs of parents to support their recovery. Some of the services provided include: parents' attorney participation in the program, early drug and alcohol assessment and treatment, mentor parent support from successful graduates of the Dependency Drug Treatment Court, domestic violence advocacy and services, transportation assistance, limited funding to assist with barriers to case plan completion, linkages to employment and benefits services, therapeutic services, pregnancy prevention education, developmental and behavioral screening,

assessment and interventions for all children, child appointed special advocates (CASA) for many children, linkages to health coverage and primary care physicians, access to parenting workshops, home visitation, early care and education services, oral health care for children and some limited dental services for adults, a wide range of age-appropriate community activities, and referrals to community resources.

One of the most significant barriers faced when helping a family stabilize is housing. The Family Wellness Court had representatives from the housing community that worked with the collaborative to get housing vouchers for families who are in need of housing. A quarterly meeting is held to address this continuing need.

Observation Findings

- 1 It was very apparent that many of these families were involved with many systems or agencies during their court order. It was evident how frustrating this could be for parents who are trying to meet all of the requirements, while staying clean and sober.
- 2 The stakeholders in the Family Wellness Court were all very committed to creating a successful path for these families.
- 3 The judge in the Family Wellness Court was very committed to the success of these families in the courtroom, as well as in the community where she advocated for additional services.
- 4 When there is appropriate involvement in case reviews and in the courtroom, more information is shared and a more prepared plan is created for the family.
- 5 I was impressed with the mentoring program for the parents. The mentors had been through the process before and could guide the parents in these families to be more successful.

Year 3 Annual Report SRI Project

An evaluation of the Family Wellness Court for Infants and Toddlers was written. It was called the Year 3 Annual Report SRI Project 18255 on September 27, 2010 and it was prepared by Shari Golan,

Kristen Rouspil, Tracy Juan, and Cyndi Williamson. Santa Clara County hired SRI International to evaluate and report outcomes of the Family Wellness Court. This was a very small sample and may result in outcomes changing over time. Some of the findings based on 59 families with closed cases included:

- 1 71% of children were reunified with one or both parents.
- 2 The average amount of time a family was with the FWC was 15 months.
- 3 70% of families fully or partially completed the four key components of the program: FWC Hearings, Substance Abuse Assessments, Substance Abuse Treatments, and the Mentor Parent Program.

Satisfaction with Family Wellness Court

- **Involvement With Services Case** 90–93% felt there were very much involved with the process
- **FWC Providers** There was 88–100% satisfaction with all of the providers
- **Substance Abuse Treatment** 96–98% satisfaction with treatment
- **Family Team Meetings** 91–96% of families saw them as useful in developing the service plan.
- **Services Were Trauma-Sensitive** 92% to 96% of the parents agreed that service delivery was trauma-sensitive.
- **Incentives and Literature Were Helpful** 94% of parents agreed.
- The biggest supports identified were the service providers.
- The biggest barrier was identified as not having permanent housing.
- The primary suggested change to the FWC was to provide more assistance with housing.

Relevant training was offered to all of the service providers in this program. Providers were trained in all of the program requirements so they would have a better understanding of the expectations for parents. Family Wellness Court administrators were all trained on the T. Berry Brazelton Touchpoints Method. This method is focused on motivating parents and working on the parent-child relationship.

The next step of the evaluation is a comparison of three years of Family Wellness Court outcomes to Drug Dependency Court outcomes from before this program was implemented. I look forward to this report.

Recommendations

It was apparent from the Three Year Study completed on the Family Wellness Court and from my observations of both of the Family Wellness Court and the Drug Dependency Court that they were able to accomplish more as a collaborative with other representatives in the courts. They were able to achieve an increase in many of their outcomes for at-risk families in Santa Clara County. They were also able to maximize funding and minimize duplication of services.

I would like to recommend that Alameda County continue to increase the work being done by collaborating with other agencies and community providers. There seems to be strength in numbers when people work as a team and share their resources.

Our clients cross many departments and agencies, and resources may be duplicated or overlooked if the appropriate people are not involved. Santa Clara's use of braiding and blending funding streams seems to be useful in the current economic times. I would recommend considering this wherever it is possible.

It was apparent that the efforts in Santa Clara to address alcohol and other drug addictions within the court system were quite effective. I would recommend that Alameda County consider increasing their collaborations with agencies and providers at the court level to improve outcomes for families. I would also recommend that Alameda County consider implementation of a similar drug dependency court.

Conclusion

I set out to observe the Family Wellness Court because it sounded like a positive way to address a serious situation. I was very excited to see what a positive and effective impact this program had on families.

There were so many supportive programs put in place for these families in a timely manner and the service providers involved were a great support.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Santa Clara County for offering the Family Wellness Court as a BASSC project. I would also like to thank Cynthia Lee Ambar and Frank Motta for all of the precious time they offered for this project. I would also like to thank Judge Erika R. Yew and Judge Katherine Lucero for allowing me to observe their courtrooms. Seeing the healthy families in these courtrooms is evidence of the success of the Family Wellness Court and the Drug Dependency Court in Santa Clara County.

I would like to thank Alameda County for allowing me the opportunity to be part of the BASSC program. A special thanks to my supervisor, Gana Eason, and Assistant Agency Director, Sam Tuttelman, for allowing me the time to do this project. I would also like to thank Yolanda Baldavinos, Retired Agency Director; Don Edwards, Alameda County BASSC Liaison and Assistant Agency Director; Lori Jones, Intermediate Co-Agency Director; and Dan Kaplan, Intermediate Co-Agency Director, for approving my participation. This has been a very rewarding project and I feel honored to have observed such a worthy program.