

Drug Court of Victoria Evaluation

May 2005

The Drug Court Pilot Program was established under the *Sentencing (Amendment) Act 2002* as a division of the Magistrates' Court in May 2002. The Drug Court is being trialled at Dandenong Magistrates' Court over a three-year period due to be completed in June 2005.

The Drug Court pilot is aimed at individuals who are drug or alcohol dependent, and whose dependency contributed to their offending. The Drug Court utilises the coercive powers of the criminal justice system to achieve the therapeutic goals of reducing drug use and offending behaviour, through the imposition of a Drug Treatment Order which may be made for up to two years. An intensive treatment program is devised which may include drug and alcohol treatment, medical, psychiatric or psychological treatment and/or attendance at vocational, educational, and employment programs. The Drug Treatment Order is an alternative to incarceration.

The Drug Court pilot was the focus of a series of evaluations completed in December 2004 by Turning Point Alcohol & Drug Centre and Health Outcomes International. The Department of Justice also engaged Acumen Alliance to complete a 'Benefit and Cost Analysis of the Drug Court Program' and a final report was produced in January 2005.

Evaluation Findings

Welfare

- The vast majority of participants have shown considerable improvement in welfare and social functioning: "...participants were adamant that this intervention had made a significant difference to their lives...[and]

they spoke of feeling valued by the Magistrate [and] the team."

Social Connectedness

- Being able to live in a self supporting way, independent from parents is one of the many indicators of making a successful transition from youth to adulthood. The proportion living with parents has more than halved from 39 per cent to 18 per cent.
- Participants living with friends (effectively homeless and couch surfing) has been reduced to nil while the proportion living in a relationship with a partner or with children has almost doubled from 22 per cent to 41 per cent.

Income Support

- Overall level of income support other than through unemployment benefits has more than doubled from 15 per cent to 39 per cent, including the rate of full time employment having more than doubled from 11 per cent to 25 per cent, and the proportion unemployed has reduced from 86 per cent to 54 per cent - a drop of 32 per cent of the study group after six months.



Re-offending Rates

- During time spent out of custody in the study period (i.e. 'free' days), members of the treatment group (Drug Treatment Order participants) committed offences at a substantially lower rate (4.49 offences per 365 free days) than the comparison group (5.80). When the 'opportunity' factor is taken into account, the Drug Court is having a greater effect on reducing offending rates compared to the alternative of incarceration.
- Drug Court graduates re-offended at 32 per cent of the rate of the comparison group who had been in prison - a 68 per cent reduction in re-offending among graduates.
- Theft, violence and drug offences reduced among the graduate group and also among the whole treatment group on average but not among the Drug Treatment Order cancelled group.
- The offending rate among graduates reduced by 30 per cent between the 'pre' period and the study period, and drug offences reduced to zero during the study period for the graduate group.

Cost Effectiveness Analysis

- The analysis of costs and effectiveness (as measured by recidivism rates) of the Drug Court indicates that, when operating at a 'steady state' level (commensurate with a 95 per cent participation rate), the Drug Court is both less costly and more effective than the alternative of incarceration.

- Once the participation rate reaches 90 per cent, the costs of the two alternatives are equal, but the Drug Court would continue to be more effective in reducing re-offending.

Benefit-Cost Analysis

- Overall, the Drug Court program is considered to have a strong positive net benefit, and that the benefits will increase as more participants graduate and as the number of graduates re-integrated into the community accumulates each year. The Drug Court provides positive returns to both the Department of Justice and the Department of Human Services.

The above evaluations clearly demonstrate that the benefits of the Drug Court approach far exceed its costs, and that it is more cost-effective than imprisonment in reducing re-offending.

The Drug Court provides an excellent example for joint service delivery programs in the health and justice areas, working together to improve the lives of participants while improving community safety and providing a wide range of other economic and social benefits.

Copies of the Evaluation Reports can be found at www.justice.vic.gov.au

