



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

Public Information Office

Problem-Solving Courts

A growing number of “problem-solving courts” have gone into operation in Pennsylvania in recent years, and more are on the way.

These innovative courts focus on specific types of crimes that often are interwoven with social problems. Such crimes include driving under the influence, drug offenses, drug-related offenses and crimes committed by people with mental illness. These types of crimes—particularly drug-related crimes—have a major impact on the courts and the prisons.

The goal of problem-solving courts is to supervise the treatment and rehabilitation of carefully screened and selected defendants who are willing to try to change their behavior. Instead of a jail sentence, defendants are given counseling, treatment for their addictions or illnesses, educational assistance and healthcare support. The progress of each defendant assigned to a rehab program through a problem-solving court is strictly monitored by a judge. Success depends on a partnership between the defendant and the court in a cooperative rehabilitation effort.

Defendants who complete their court-supervised programs and “graduate” are rewarded in several ways. The charges that brought them to court in the first place are dismissed. Their criminal records can be expunged. And they are given a chance at a fresh start.

Problem-solving courts benefit the public in several ways:

- They provide alternative correctional programs for non-violent offenders, thereby helping to reduce prison overcrowding.
- Through rehabilitation, they reduce the rate of recidivism—a pattern of repeat offenses common to defendants with substance abuse and behavioral problems.

- And perhaps most important, they can transform a self-destructive individual, who acts as a drain on society, into a productive citizen who makes a contribution.

Pennsylvania is home to several types of problem-solving courts, including juvenile drug courts, DUI courts, and mental health courts, but the main focus at present is on adult drug courts.

In November of 2005, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court endorsed the use of adult drug courts throughout the Commonwealth and approved a template for their operation. That template provides for a collaborative effort in which the drug court judge works with the prosecutor, defense counsel, drug treatment professionals, law enforcement officials and social service agencies to assist the defendant in battling and conquering his or her drug addiction.

The drug court program is rigorous. Defendants are required to undergo intensive treatment and counseling, submit to frequent and random drug testing, and regularly appear before the drug court judge. Those who fail to comply with program requirements are subject to sanctions which can include imprisonment.