

*Juvenile offenders find a way out of crime
and substance abuse through drug court.*

Courage to Choose Treatment

By Wanda King

As the first of its kind in California, the Tulare County Juvenile Drug Court offers long-term, life-changing alternatives to youths in the criminal justice system. With relatively low annual costs per juvenile and low recidivism rates, this program has gained national attention.

The Tulare County Juvenile Drug Court (TCJDC) arose out of the frustration of those in the criminal justice system over the lack of effective intervention for repeat offenders, most of whom were addicted to drugs or using drugs at the time of their offense. The problem is especially critical for young offenders. National estimates of substance use among juvenile offenders are at least five times higher than rates for the general population and have not shown any evidence of decreasing in the past few years.

With shrinking dollars for supervision and capacity for placement, minors frequently go to court, receive an order to attend drug counseling and school, to observe curfews and to get drug testing. Nevertheless, they are not accountable and do not make meaningful changes because we have not educated families and systems about addiction and recovery. Until the advent of treatment-oriented drug courts, the majority of drug abusers ordered by judges to participate in treatment did not remain involved in the process long enough to develop behaviors and skills for long-term abstinence.

Interrupting the Cycle

With little juvenile drug court resources available, Tulare County looked to the Adult Drug Court models in Oakland and Bakersfield. In an effort to interrupt the cycle, we used a collaborative of local

resources and a highly structured program to design the first Juvenile Drug Court in California and one of only three across the nation.

TCJDC is a nine-month, three-phase approach to substance abuse and related criminal behavior. Non-violent offenders must volunteer to participate in the program and by doing so, they are taking the first step toward accepting responsibility for their behavior and their future. Participants and their parents sign a contract that mandates attendance at school, drug counseling support meetings, work force preparation groups, drug testing, supervision, judicial review and an aftercare program.

The program coordinator, case managers and probation officers monitor each juvenile's participation and prepare a progress report for the judge before each bi-weekly court appearance. Under the supervision of Judge William Silveira Jr., Tulare County Juvenile Drug Court, the juvenile's treatment is reinforced, and he or she is held accountable, thus establishing a rehabilitative relationship through intensive, interactive court appearances. The judge rewards successes and responds to relapses or other contract violations with immediate and appropriate sanctions that simultaneously address the juvenile's conduct and encourage more involvement in treatment.

Everybody Benefits

Since its inception on Oct.20, 1995, nearly 400 youth have been evaluated for the drug court program. In all, 249 youth have been accepted, and 63 percent of those youth have either graduated or are currently in the program. The goal of drug courts is to reduce the abuse of alcohol and other drugs and related crimes at a cost savings to tax payers, and TCJDC is meeting the challenge. Recently, the National Association of Drug Court Professionals selected the Tulare County Juvenile Drug Court as one of its new mentor sites, which participate in a network of drug courts that share information and resources.

Not only do the participants and their families benefit from participating in the juvenile drug court program, but direct and indirect benefits to our citizens are immediate and long-reaching. The recidivism rates for participants who have graduated from juvenile drug court are 7 percent for violation of probation and about 5 percent for new arrests. Students are in school more, which maintains the average daily attendance (ADA) state dollar and reduces the truancy that often leads to vandalism, theft, and alcohol and drug use.

During the last year, 25 participants worked at full- or part-time jobs while attending the program and after graduation. Participants are not allowed to work unless they comply with all components of their drug court contract. Because fewer drug-affected babies are born, medical costs for treating these often chronically ill children are reduced at a cost savings to the taxpayer.

In addition, the cost of placing or incarcerating a juvenile offender can exceed \$32,000 a year, compared to the cost of a minor going through the TCJCD, which is approximately \$2,000 a year. This allows our juvenile hall, group home, boot camp and California Youth Authority placements to be

reserved for more dangerous and chronic offenders.

The Tough Choice

The Tulare County Juvenile Drug Court offers a compelling choice for juveniles in the criminal justice system who have alcohol or other drug problems. Many of these kids have the courage to choose treatment, often not really sure what "treatment" means.

One of the most frequently asked questions is "Why do kids come into drug court? They don't get their offenses dismissed when they graduate, and some of them have already had a dispositional hearing and know nothing further will happen to them if they don't choose to come into drug court."

If a young person is not doing very well in the program, perhaps really struggling, we ask him or her the same thing: "Why did you come in? You had your terms and conditions of probation, you knew you weren't going to boot camp or a group home, why did you come in?"

There are different motivators for different individuals. Some volunteer fearing what might happen if they don't. But I hear one reason time and again and believe it is truly at the heart of why most young people come into drug court.

The typical answer is "Because I thought it would help me stop using drugs. I'm so tired of being in trouble all the time, fighting with my family. They don't trust me. I don't play sports anymore. I'm always in trouble at school. I really don't want to live my life like this." Even at 15 and 16 years old, people usually recognize a chance to make their lives better when they see it, but not every one has the courage to make the hard choice.

The rewards for the young people who do make the more difficult choice often far exceed the dismissal of their offense. These young people are developing new, positive peer groups and begin communicating with their parents. They learn about accountability and ways to stay clean and sober. They develop coping skills and critical thinking skills and begin to improve in school. They graduate, and some go on to college.

Two 1998 high school graduating classes in Tulare county will have a valedictorian who is a juvenile drug court graduate. Recently, one young lady won an essay contest and a young man won a trip to Orlando, Fla. to represent his school at an awards banquet. [See excerpts from his essay below]

Juvenile drug court participants and graduates have made presentations at national conferences in Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles, Calif., as well as at state and local conferences focused on youth and their issues. In 1996, one participant attended the White House Leadership Conference on Youth, Drug Use and Violence and met with President Clinton.

Not everyone is successful in juvenile drug court, but one parent, while attending her son's drug court graduation, described their experience of drug court with this age-old story: "There was a little boy who

walked along the beach day after day, picking up starfish from the sand and throwing them back into the ocean. Each day, the little boy would see an old man who was also taking a walk on the beach. The little boy would wave to the old man, and the old man would just shake his head and keep walking. One day, the old man came over to the little boy and said, 'Son, why do you walk this beach day after day throwing those starfish back into the ocean? Don't you know there are thousands of starfish that wash up on this beach, and the few you throw back each day can never make a difference?' The little boy smiled at the old man, bent down, picked up a starfish and said, 'well, maybe not sir, but it makes a difference to this one,' and he tossed it into the waves." ·

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**Excerpt from an essay by Michael Barrera,
a recent graduate of the
Tulare County Juvenile Drug Court**

"In my short 16 years of life I have gone through a lot of pain, and I have made many wrong choices that have almost destroyed my young life... I am an example of how someone can change drastically if one really wants to.

I went from not caring what direction I was taking in life to being excited and looking forward to the future. However; I did not achieve this determination alone. If it had not been for my family, I may have very well ended up, a hopeless cause, or dead on the streets...One program I joined was Drug Court.

While I was in that program, I felt confidence building up inside me. As I began to see myself progressing, my entire mental outlook toward everyone, including myself became positive. I felt more confident to learn to make better choices.

I graduated from Drug Court with an overall average of 98 percentile. I continued to maintain exceptional behavior even after I completed the program...My educational growth has dramatically improved and it has not been easy because all the drugs I took really messed up my brain...

I look forward to my classes every day, even the hard ones. I now maintain an overall GPA of 3.4...I plan to attend college and become a probation officer or a counselor I want to be able to give back to the community the encouragement I myself received from others. "