Top 5 lessons from the Mental Health Court

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Judge Ginger Lerner-Wren’s latest Huffington Post blog…

“Rejecting stigma in favor of equality and human dignity is the essence of social justice.” — Judge Ginger Lerner-Wren

It has been 18 years since Broward County, Florida launched America’s first Mental Health Court dedicated to the decriminalization of persons with serious mental illness. In honor of all mental health consumers and advocates working to advance change and social justice, here are the top 5 lessons I have learned:

The Power of Dignity: When Broward County began its problem solving court in 1997, we hoped it would be successful. If nothing else, the court would take aim at dispelling stigma, target trauma, and work to restore personhood. The first and vital lesson is that dignity and respect is its own force. Dignity dispels fear and levels the playing field. Ultimately, the promotion of dignity becomes a reflection of the integrity of the court process, the protection of legal rights, and the promotion of human rights.

The Value of Listening: The theory of Therapeutic Jurisprudence is built upon the principles of procedural justice. Meaning, if a court experience is to be perceived as fair and positive no matter the outcome, a court participant’s experience should include the belief that his/her voice has been heard. It requires a non-judgmental way of receiving information and communicating. If a judge is sincere about humanizing justice, then soft skills, such as humility, empathy and a willingness to acknowledge the strengths of others must be mastered and applied. The value of heartfelt listening is deep and transformative. It drives trust, enhances intuitive thinking, and ultimately improves complex decision-making. Listening is a core element of problem-solving justice.

Laughter Heals: Over the years our court team has laughed a lot. It is often the unexpected and profound comments that court participants share. Their gratitude for the court process and ways in which that is expressed and demonstrated is at times surprisingly humorous and inspiring. The lesson is that even in the midst of great challenge, laughter can be magical. It heals and binds the human experience. In those moments, it also reminds us how fortunate we are to do this work.

Hope is Tangible: So many families come to court in extreme despair, fear and frustration. Bridges have been burned, trust violated and relationships broken. Family members often do not believe there is hope for loved ones with serious mental illness and substance disorders. Largely due to stigma, shame and battling complex barriers to care. The lesson is that hope is more than a concept or a feeling. It brings the future into the now and in that moment — life can begin again.
**Treatment Works:** One of the greatest lessons of Broward’s Mental Health Court is that treatment works. That true recovery is possible if a person is linked with proper treatment, care and supports and is willing to commit to recovery and wellness. Together, working in partnership, our court team has witnessed tens of thousands of people effected by mental health conditions and other medical, social and economic needs. Court participants embrace their lives and dreams. The overarching lesson, if our policy makers and leaders resolve to prioritize behavioral health as essential to overall health, then people can achieve the promise of recovery. This will also promote public safety and break arrest cycles. Moreover, as a matter of justice we can end the inappropriate criminalization of people effected by mental health disorders in America.