

Opinion

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The Opioid Crisis: Building Court, University, and Community Partnerships

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Received Date: August 25, 2021

Published Date: December 16, 2021

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Building and maintaining partnerships with community agencies and institutions provide critical training opportunities for students and faculty. In addition, the benefits are evident for all stakeholders. Court Clinics have been a mainstay in the First and Fourth Judicial Districts of the Tennessee Court System for almost two decades. Two faculty members in the Department of Counseling & Human Services at East Tennessee State University have developed relationships, implemented formal processes, and conducted services for the courts including parenting, therapeutic parenting, forensic parenting, supervised visitations, assessment of high conflict couples, mediation, and referrals to agencies when appropriate. Undergraduate and graduate students have participated in the clinics and some have completed internships. During the past decade the opioid crisis has informed a great deal of the work. Circuit Court Judge Duane Slone of the Fourth Judicial District encouraged the focus of our work in his district to concentrate on meeting the needs of individuals suffering from substance use disorder.

After concentrating on services for families in conflict it became increasingly obvious the majority of these families were struggling with substance use disorders by one or more parents, the children, or a caretaker. Judge Slone's participation and influence on the direction of the Fourth Judicial District Court work was paramount. I began working increasingly with Judge Slone and his staff in Drug Court. Judge Slone quickly realized the resources and options provided by the state for Drug Courts were limited and could not provide the degree of services necessary to combat the escalating crisis. He asked that his staff and I look into the possibility of

organizing a non-profit group that could enhance the options he was able to provide through Drug Court. This resulted in the Fourth Judicial District Recovery Services 501(c)3. The board of directors consists of court, community, government, and agency stakeholders. Individuals representing the prosecutor's office, public defender's office, sheriffs from two of the four counties, physicians, mental health providers, parole officers, representatives from faith-based groups and agencies, and East Tennessee State University faculty make up the board. Judge Slone and one of the other judges in the district also attend the meetings. The meetings are intense and board members are given opportunities to interact and work across areas of expertise.

The group has raised funds and grants have been accessed. The non-profit now owns land and has a large cabin where 24-hour staff provide services. The current cabin is designated for females referred through the courts as a diversion to jail or prison sentences. They may bring their children to live with them but many are working to regain custody of their children. The first drug-free baby was born to one of the cabin mothers about two years ago and this provided great inspiration to the women in the cabin recovering from substance use disorder. There is currently no residential center for males but one is in the planning stages. Males and females are both accepted into the program and receive services but the cabin is reserved for females with preference for expectant mothers and women with children.

One area that board members have concentrated on in the past few months is making sure all the individuals going through Drug Court and referred to Recovery Services are administered the

Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale (ACEs). Judge Slone, the board members, and service providers are dedicated to trauma informed care. Assisting individual suffering from substance use disorder in knowing and evaluating the place their childhood experience play in their current situation assists them in overcoming many obstacles to sobriety. In addition, it allows them to evaluate their relationship with their children and make appropriate decisions. Judge Slone is known as a “tough judge with a heart,” and even when his rulings and sentences are difficult he provides a trauma informed lens. His efforts include family members as a critical piece of the program and the family members are also offered services.

The early days of Judge Slone’s work in Drug Court and Recovery Services relied heavily on the board members to not only develop programs but also to deliver many of services. Due to increased public support for the work and grants we are now able to train individuals to perform many of the services or contract with other agencies. Civic and community groups have stepped forward to provide for many of the needs of the cabin. Staff continues to grow but the need still far outweighs the resources available.

Judge Slone insists that when milestones are met and individuals complete their plan set out by the courts that celebrations are in order. Every year Recovery Services sponsors a formal meal in recognition of those completing the program requirements. The board of directors, staff, community supporters, judges, family members and the graduates all attend. There are often 200 people in attendance. The graduates may speak but since some are reluctant the staff prepares a video honoring each participant’s journey. This is one of the most powerful moments experienced by the board, the judges and the participants. The only other event that comes close is the children’s Christmas party.

Judge Duane Slone is a humble man that has made the most significant positive difference in the court system that I have witnessed in over two decades of involvement with the courts. He is consistently anxious to hear about research and involve students in his efforts. He often serves as a guest speaker to anyone and every group that wants to learn more about his work. Last year he appeared on NBC national television with two graduates from Recovery Services. He also continues to teach us lessons publicly and privately. He and his wife adopted two babies born to mothers with substance use disorder. On November 21, 2019 Judge Slone was recognized by Chief Justice John G Roberts, Jr. at the United States Supreme Court for his ground-breaking work helping people with opioid use disorder. He received the National Center for State Courts William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence.

Judge Slone work, dedication, and influence have resulted in additions and changes in the manner I work with students. I developed and teach a senior/graduate level course, The Opioid Crisis: Intervention to Prevention. I have also recognized the need for our students to leave the university as informed professionals regarding substance use disorder and the issues many face in the court system. One major take-away is encouraging universal screening for substance use disorder for everyone processed into jail. We are better able to serve children and families when we are informed and armed with correct information and have community partners willing to work together.

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.