

Deborah Miller and Craig Stratton: Keeping Drug Courts Vibrant During the Pandemic, 8/2/21

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insights from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

Today I'm pleased to have on the program two guests, Craig Stratton, Case Manager for the Albany County Recovery Court, and Deborah Miller, the Resource Coordinator in this St. Lawrence County Court Felony Drug Treatment part. Both were recently singled out by Chief Judge Janet DiFiore for their Herculean efforts to keep Drug Courts up and running during the pandemic.

Craig, Debbie, thank you for coming on the program and thanks for all you've done to keep these vital programs vibrant and effective during this pandemic.

Now, addiction is not something where you can hit the pause button and wait it out while the world waits for a deadly pandemic to pass. And the Chief Judge specifically referenced Craig's "determination and ingenuity" and actually quoted Debbie, who said Drug Courts "refused to abandon the people we serve."

Craig, let's start with you. What exactly is the Albany County recovery court?

Craig Stratton: John, first, I want to say thank you for having me on this cast. I really appreciate it.

So, the Albany County Drug Court — we also call it the Albany County Recovery Court — is basically an alternative to incarceration for individuals who have substance use disorders and have pending charges in the criminal justice system. What we do is we try to provide alternatives to incarceration, opposed to individuals who have substance use disorders going into custody, like prison or jail, depending on the crime they're charged with.

And so our job is to link those appropriate individuals to substance use counseling or any additional counseling that they may need in order to help them really live vibrant and productive lives. It's more of a healing process. We do a lot of other things as well. We deal with a lot of veterans, DWI, trying to provide some assistance and some motivation for them to start to do different things with their lives.

John Caher: Now, how long has the Recovery Court been in existence?

Craig Stratton: Albany County Recovery Court itself started in January 2002. It initially started down in Albany city court, but eventually they moved it up here to the felony Albany County Court. So, it was January 2002 that they started this.

John Caher: Now, what do you do as Case Manager? What are your duties?

Craig Stratton: We monitor individuals. We link them to resources and services and treatment services. The Albany County Recovery Court does a lot of intensive case management where we're meeting with our clients on a regular basis. We're getting updates on any assistance that they may need during this process. We're consistently following them through and making sure they're in compliance with the guidelines with Drug Court.

John Caher: Debbie, tell me about your program in St. Lawrence County. What is it? What do you do? How is it similar and different from what Craig does in Albany?

Debbie Miller: Well, thank you very much for having me on your program. And I'm delighted to be here with Craig as well and hear what other Drug Courts are doing.

I am the Resource Coordinator for the St Lawrence County Judicial Diversion Program, which is a felony drug treatment court that was based on the Rockefeller reform. And I'm also the Resource Coordinator for the Ogdensburg City Drug Treatment Court, which is a misdemeanor court.

Both courts are very similar in that we offer resources. We connect our participants with necessary resources to help them in their recovery from addiction, mental health, and assorted other issues. We help people to get reunited with their families, bring families back together. And we have a very intense monitoring program, as Craig already mentioned.

What I'd really like to say is that this really is a coordinated effort. We cannot do this without the outside resources that we have, the probation departments, treatment programs, mental health programs, the department of social services. We connect with all of those programs so that we can, in turn, connect our participants with those programs to help them in their recovery.

John Caher: Now you mentioned the Rockefeller reform, and I think you're referring to are the Rockefeller Drug Laws that for 25 years or so embraced a "lock

'em up and throw away the key" approach to drug addiction. I think we would agree it was historically ineffective. And so, is this perhaps a smarter way to approach that problem, Debbie?

Debbie Miller: Yes. Yes. I do think that it's effective in so many ways. And I think that COVID helped us to realize that more than ever our participants were able to see that this really is a non-adversarial program that really does help them to find the resources they need so that they can engage in recovery and make the changes necessary to stay out of prison.

John Caher: Now, you mentioned the pandemic, so let's go there. In mid March 2020, the earth fell off its axis and the world as we know it kind of ceased to exist. And so I'd like to ask each of you how you were able to keep this program intact. As I said at the beginning, addiction is not something where you can say, "Well, don't be addicted for a year. We'll get back to you later." Craig, why don't you get us started with that.

Craig Stratton: Okay. Thank you. So COVID, as we all know, is this totally unprecedented situation for everyone, particularly for Drug Courts or we Problem Solving Courts because we were so accustomed to monitoring the individuals and seeing them face-to-face to see how they're doing. And then one day they said, okay, tomorrow you don't come back to the office. So, it was like a matter of in 24 hours trying to scramble around. How are we going to do this? How do we connect with our clients? My first order of business was to try to connect with our team, to come up with a plan.

I was familiar with Zoom. So, I said, well, let's create a Zoom account, which I did, not using the court equipment or anything like that, to get my judge and the DA and the attorney and the rest of my colleagues here in the Drug Court office to get connected so we could start problem solving. That was the first order of business, and then, within that 24-hour period, trying to reach out to all of our clients saying, "Listen, I need email addresses and phone numbers." Remember when this first happened, everyone didn't have remote access. So, we had to scramble around fairly quickly. So, we got email addresses for clients' phone numbers. That was my first order of business when, we were first informed of the lockdown.

John Caher: Now, Debbie, Craig mentioned the access to justice issue in the fact that not everyone has a computer or a smartphone. In some of the areas in your county, internet access alone can be a little bit of a challenge. So, what were the challenges that you particularly dealt with during this pandemic of providing a service to people that you could not serve face-to-face?

Debbie Miller: Well, we had very similar things going on here. St. Lawrence County is one of the largest counties in New York State. We reached out to each of our participants individually by telephone and we tried to reach out to them in any way possible. Thank goodness most of them do have smart phones. We were able to connect them with probation, and I got right to work. As soon as we were told we needed to go home, we knew that addiction does not stop here. And when people are faced with this type of a challenge, this was scary for us.

So, I can't imagine going home and not being able to reach out to the people that we were usually connected with and use for support. So, probation and I made every effort to contact each participant on a regular basis, sometimes a daily basis for those that needed it. We had to teach them how to use the technology and that worked to our benefit. We used Skype as we were able to reach out to them and get them set up with Skype. We did Skype sessions twice a week for our groups. So, we had two groups and it turned out to be, I think, an exceptional piece and outwork coming together.

John Caher: Okay. It sounds to me like you both deserve and need a vacation, but what have we learned during the pandemic that we can carry forward? Are there practices we've developed that can and should continue once this pandemic goes away, assuming it is going to go away?

Craig Stratton: Thank you, Debbie, for what you relayed because I just wanted to go into something really quick about the addiction piece of it and us scrambling around trying to connect with our clients. Isolation is detrimental for those who suffer from substance use disorders. So, that was the added motivation to connect with our clients because it is really dangerous for them when all of a sudden, we get shut down. So, we were scrambling around making those phone calls, teaching them how to use the technology, even by phone, through email. So, we did a lot of problem solving because we are a problem-solving court.

It was very motivating and it was inspired by a lot of what was going on. But we were able to weather the storm. I think there was some benefits over the past year and a half to the remote connection with our clients. We used to have those clients that couldn't come to court, or they were late for court, or they lived in certain areas that they didn't have ready access, especially our DWI participants who were not allowed to drive. Initially, that created a problem, but we found that they've been so much more engaged through Skype or Microsoft Teams or if it was Zoom during the time when we first started. They were so much more engaged, especially with the judge and even with our case managers.

All of us learned something in the process, which was great, and our clients were appreciative because they learned in the process. And, luckily, we didn't lose a lot of people in this process. So, I think moving forward this technology tool that we have is great to connect with people. I think that this pandemic has shown a lot and it's taught many of us a lot in the process.

John Caher: Your region includes, of course, the City of Albany, a city of roughly a hundred-thousand people. But you also have regions down in the Hill Towns and outer portions of the county that are every bit as remote, every bit as rural, as anything in Debbie's county. So, there seem to be some parallels here between what you are facing and what Debbie faces. So, Debbie, same question for you. What have you learned during the pandemic that you're going to keep doing once the pandemic has finally left us?

Debbie Miller: Skype was a way that we came together as a whole, in a way that had never been done before. In a regular Drug Court session, our participants come into Drug Court, we hear the cases and they leave. Our participants as well as our treatment team members have rarely had the opportunity to participate with our participants in the manner that we did. So, not only did our treatment team members get a glimpse into our participants' lives, but our participants also got to see a part of our treatment team members that they had not been afforded before.

I think that brought a whole different realm of comradery and our participants got to change their perspective about the judicial system as a whole because they really got to experience that non-adversarial approach, and the fact that there is real true compassion about them. There is someone there that cares about them. And I think that this situation we were put in through COVID really drove that home for many of them. I think that really prevented a lot of relapses and a lot of death because they knew there is always somebody there on the other side.

Craig Stratton: Absolutely, I agree.

John Caher: So, it sounds like you guys have proven the adage that a crisis is an opportunity.

Debbie Miller: Yes.

Craig Stratton: Absolutely, yes.

John Caher: Debbie, Craig, thank you so much for all that you did and do and thank you for coming on the program. I know you've got fires to put out and people to save as well, I'll let you get back to your work.

Debbie Miller: Thank you both. And thank you for giving us this opportunity to give drug court a voice. I think it's a program that is often underutilized and unheard. So, thank you so much for giving us this opportunity and Craig, kudos to you and your team and to your participants and all drug courts out there.

Craig Stratton: Thank you, Deb, and keep up the great work that you're doing.