

FORT PECK TRIBES EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Fort Peck Community Wellness Court (CWC) began in February 1998 and ended in September 2003. There were 54 active juvenile participants. Of the first 50 participants, 15 (30%) graduated and 35 (70%) were terminated for being noncompliant, fleeing the jurisdiction, being remanded to federal custody, being excused for a medical reason, and reaching 18 years and aging out of the juvenile justice system.

A review of the key components of the Fort Peck CWC showed the strengths were:

- Good teamwork,
- Team members “Walk the Talk”,
- Compassionate and concerned team,
- Recognition a public defender or other family advocate needed,
- Hearsay evidence not sufficient to sanction participant,
- Detailed weekly task list,
- Parental involvement,
- Provision of incentives,
- Culture of self-evaluation,
- Diverse group at national trainings during planning stage,
- Attendance at national conferences to stay abreast,
- Mentor court to other tribes, and
- Public outreach attempts.

The CWC also had two characteristics with both strength and weakness qualities.

- Fast track to CWC with chemical dependency assessments completed after program acceptance and
- Inclusive and court-ordered participation with no assessment of readiness for change.

The CWC did make an impression on many of the participants and imparted accountability and structure to the lives of the participants. Comments from participants, team members, family members, and the community praised the CWC and credited it with making a difference in the participants' lives. Yet, it was not possible to document quantitatively a "wellness court" effect in the participants. Forty-five of the 50 participants, or 90%, were arrested on criminal charges, usually Disorderly Conduct, after leaving CWC. There was no statistically significant relationship between completion status and recidivism, graduates were as likely to be arrested for a post-program alcohol or drug charge as were terminated participants. Also, graduated and terminated participants recidivated on average in the same amount of time, eight months, after leaving CWC. When a subset of those who had been out of the CWC for 3 years was examined (N = 18), 94% had a post-program arrest. A comparison of the number of pre- and post-program charges for this subset showed no difference in the number of charges in the 3 years before CWC and the 3 years after CWC for the participants.

Weaknesses in the implementation of the Community Wellness Court were:

- Lack of participation by schools, mental health, tribal elders, and tribal leaders,
- Long and poorly facilitated staffing meetings,

- Poor communication between CWC and mental health provider,
- Lack of understanding of the CWC commitment by parents,
- Poor integration of cultural activities,
- Infrequent alcohol and drug testing,
- Full-time CWC probation officer assigned other non-CWC duties,
- CWC probation officer usual work hours 8 to 4:30,
- Vague and inconsistent incentives and sanctions list,
- Inconsistent application of incentives and sanctions,
- Nontherapeutic sanctions,
- Judge not integral member of team,
- Incomplete and missing case files,
- Difficulty in training new team members,
- No buy-in from other agencies,
- Little support from tribal executive board, and
- Community not familiar with CWC.

The lack of understanding by the family of the CWC commitment, no assessment of readiness for change, non-intensive monitoring and supervision, and nontherapeutic sanctions were the weaknesses that could have lessened the impact of the CWC in effecting behavioral change in the juvenile participants. But the overall message from team members and community members was it is difficult to put the successes on paper. They saw small positive changes in many of the participants and these small positive changes were all that much bigger given the dysfunctional and dispiriting environment the participants came from. It appears juvenile wellness courts need to offer the

participants more than treatment; they need to offer education, job training, and a focus on a positive future.