

Problem Solving Courts

The goal of problem solving courts is to respond more effectively to the issues presented to courts. There is no one single problem solving court model. Some are in large cities; others in small towns. Some deal with mental health, while others deal with drug addiction, drunk driving, juvenile mental health concerns, or other non violent offenses.

The unifying principles of problem solving courts is that they involve judicial staff (judges, probation officers, prosecuting attorneys) who have specialized training; work collaboratively with local agencies; and require accountability and monitoring of offenders. Many gather data to monitor their effectiveness and suggest ways to improve.

Problem Solving Courts Are Spreading in Pennsylvania

2008 data from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency shows that there were 7 juvenile drug courts, 2 family drug courts, 22 adult drug courts (although 12 more counties were planning to add them), 6 DUI courts, 7 adult mental health courts (although 12 more counties were planning to add them), and 1 juvenile mental health court. Specialty courts are also being considered for other problem areas such as domestic abuse, prostitution, or gun offenses.

It is not surprising that more local courts are looking at a problem solving model. Not only are they more humane from the standpoint of helping persons with serious mental illnesses. Data suggests that these programs are fiscally prudent. For example, a 2007 study of the fiscal impact of the Allegheny County Mental Health Court showed that in the first year “the decrease in jail expenditures mostly offsets the cost of treatment services,” and that over time, “the drop in jail costs more than offset the treatment costs, suggesting that the MHC program may help decrease total taxpayer costs over time.”

Support Senate Bill 383

SB 383 (a bi-partisan bill introduced by Senator Jane Orie, R-Allegheny) would allow the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to establish rules for the establishment of problem solving courts and to appoint a statewide problem solving courts coordinator and advisory committee. Such measures would allow local courts to apply for federal start-up grants. Courts may develop local rules as long as they are consistent with legislation and Supreme Court rules. A similar bill passed the Pennsylvania Senate last year by a vote of 50-0. Considerable support for problem solving courts exist in the PA House of Representatives as well.

We urge your support for SB 383.