

Spotlight on the Safety Net

*A Community Collaboration
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Robeson County Bridges for Families Program

The Robeson County Bridges for Families Program brings together an innovative group of service agencies and public officials to meet an often unseen need. They are dedicated to supporting families whose children have been in, or are at risk for, placement outside of the home due to parental substance abuse issues. The program began in October of 2007 when the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services was awarded one of 53 Regional Partnership Grants from the US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The goal of the Robeson County Bridges for Families Program is to “improve the safety, permanency, and well-being of children who are in out-of-home placement or are at risk for out-of-home placement as a result of their parent’s or caregiver’s methamphetamine or other substance abuse, as well as to improve the overall well-being and functional capacities of their families.” The primary clients served by the program are substance-involved families referred from the Robeson County Department of Social Services or Family Treatment Court and/or a range of parenting support, mental health, and substance abuse treatment services.

The relationship between child maltreatment and substance abuse is often complicated by a host of personal, economic, environmental, and social factors. In order for substance abuse treatment to be effective, a program must consider all of these issues. In addition to the necessary legal, substance abuse, and mental health services, the North Carolina Regional Partnership Grant program provides or arranges for gender-specific and family-focused wrap-around services that address related issues such as parenting skills, safety and domestic violence, poverty, transportation, social support, and child care.

Since its inception, the program has added a Family Treatment Court; expanded treatment, including enhanced residential care and transitional housing for families; and introduced four new evidence-based substance abuse services: the Matrix Model Intensive Outpatient Program, Seeking Safety Outpatient Groups, Trauma Focused-Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and the Strengthening Families Program. To build capacity in the region, 22 training events were arranged in the first year of the program. Trainings were focused on substance abuse and the family, methamphetamine addiction, and evidence-based practices for treatment providers and the new Family Drug Court team. After the trainings, the Robeson County Department of Social Services dedicated staff resources to expand collaboration with community agencies in order to help substance-involved families improve safety and permanency outcomes for their children.

A preliminary review of 2005-2006 data from social services case workers in Robeson County suggests that parental substance abuse was a primary contributing factor in at least 29% of child welfare cases where child abuse or neglect claims were substantiated or in which it was found that the family was in need of service. Substance abuse was also found to be a factor in 56% of the cases where children were placed in foster care.

In the start-up year of the program, 15 families and 25 children were served. The program estimates that over the five years of the grant more than 200 substance-involved families engaged with the Robeson County Department of Social Services will benefit from the collaborative efforts of community partners working with the Robeson County Bridges for Families Program and from the expanded array of services provided. The program will seek to sustain itself by integrating efforts into existing systems and working with state leaders in the North Carolina Division of Social Services (DSS), the North Carolina Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Abuse Services, and the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts.

North Carolina is participating in a national evaluation effort of these types of programs with the findings to be reported annually to Congress. Through use of data from process and outcome evaluations, the program will serve as a model for statewide strategic planning efforts to support best practices and systems of care that will enhance outcomes for North Carolina children and families affected by parental or caretaker substance abuse.

The value of the program is highlighted by the participants. In interviews with community partners involved with the program, one partner stated, "We speak more freely, share information and ideas more readily, and see each other as equal partners as opposed to peeking at each other from behind the safety of institutional fences." A partner from the guardian ad litem service said, "As a team member working with the drug court, it has provided me with a new way of thinking about substance abuse. I am now more patient in dealing with parents who are battling the disease of addiction. Drug court has given our families a new hope in regaining custody of their children. Our families now see that they have a support system that includes the court and DSS, two entities that they previously viewed as obstacles in reuniting with their children."

When discussing ways in which the program has influenced how agencies work with substance-involved families, a community partner stated, "The program represents a completely new way for us to deal with substance abuse. It is an uplifting program that focuses on proven strategies to assist people with their recovery [and] relates to participants in a way that does not lose sight of their worth as individual people." Judge J. Stanley Carmical, who is the chief district court judge for Judicial District 16B and serves as the presiding judge for the new therapeutic court, said, "I'm satisfied that even if you took the money today, we'd [still] be 10 times better off than we were before the grant started."

"I know that if I got a problem," one participant stated, "I know that there is somebody there to help me. I get to go to my meetings, go to the doctor, and get my medicine. Drug court is good too 'cause they let me know that there is somebody there to help me make my life different. I just love my life today, because I know that I am doing something different."

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