

Drug Court Teams

New Ulm Medical Center – New Ulm, MN

Overview

New Ulm Medical Center (NUMC), part of Allina Health, is a nonprofit hospital and clinic serving the region in and around Brown County located in south central Minnesota. The 45-bed hospital offers an extensive range of care options with more than 30 affiliated physicians and a full complement of visiting specialists.

Minnesota began drug courts in 1996 to reduce recidivism rates, treat underlying chemical dependency and substance abuse, and stop the revolving door of individuals being sentenced for a crime, serving their time and then landing back in court on another charge. The state's 57 drug courts consist of a team of professionals who provide comprehensive support to help keep participants sober and out of jail, and to participate positively in the community. To qualify for the program, individuals must be dependent on drugs or alcohol and have been convicted of a nonviolent criminal offense.

Todd's story is an example of success. He struggled in his 20s. Substance abuse and run-ins with the law landed him in a court-ordered treatment program, and it looked like he was not going to break the cycle. Every time he received the judge's orders, he failed to comply. Todd was headed for jail.

But he was a member of a drug court, and the drug court team referred Todd to NUMC Addiction Services. Following a full assessment, he was referred for a neuropsychological exam, which revealed extensive brain injury and damage. The exam resulted in suggestions for how to better communicate with Todd, including the use of certain audio and visual cues, which the drug court team and NUMC Addiction Services staff implemented into Todd's treatment.

Once the judge incorporated these communication techniques, Todd was better able to understand, remember and stay compliant with the judge's orders. Today, he is sober, has a full-time job and has stayed out of jail – and out of the vicious cycle many substance abusers experience.

In Brown County, Todd's drug court team consists of a judge, drug court coordinator, county attorney, defense attorney, drug and alcohol treatment counselor, mental health professional, law enforcement officer and other professionals. NUMC provides substance abuse counselors as part of the drug court team. The team's expertise helped Todd understand and address underlying health issues that were contributing to his substance abuse.

“We all come to the table with different opinions,” said Marie Larsen, addiction services manager at NUMC. “So to work as a team to figure out what we think might be the best option for the patient and know that everyone has the patient's best interest in mind – it's really impressive to watch that happen.”

Addiction treatment begins with a complete biopsychosocial assessment, which takes into account medical, mental and environmental factors, among others.

“We look at all the different components of their life so we can get them the services they need,” said Larsen. A treatment recommendation is then made to the court.

Impact

Drug courts are a success story for stakeholders, communities and participants like Todd. In some cases, participants return to serve on drug court teams, strengthening the program that made a difference in their lives. A mother who was addicted to methamphetamine now manages a local business and gives back by hiring others going through drug court. A woman who struggled with mental illness until her experience with drug court is now a model member of her drug court team.

NUMC plays a pivotal role in its community by breaking cycles of substance abuse and changing lives. Working with drug courts to address substance abuse is one way Minnesota’s hospitals and health systems are partnering to strengthen healthy communities.

Lessons Learned

In a 2012 study of 535 individuals who had gone through drug court, nearly half were dealing not only with substance abuse but with a mental health disorder. Minnesota’s hospitals play a major role helping drug court participants receive treatment and achieve recovery.

“The participants in drug court come and see us starting at three times per week,” said Larsen. “They remain in treatment with us for the two years they’re in drug court so they have additional support, can process the things that have held them back in the past and can work toward creating a good, strong, stable recovery plan.”

Future Goals

The drug court team is continually looking to expand community partnerships to benefit participants. For example, plans are being implemented to assist drug court participants who have not completed a high school degree earn their General Education Diploma. NUMC Addiction Services staff continue to expand their knowledge base and techniques. For example, staff are being trained in the use of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, which can be useful for many patients who have a history of trauma or anxiety disorder. Medication-assisted treatments also are part of the program at NUMC, such as Suboxone, which has been proven to reduce cravings and eliminate withdrawals, allowing patients to be more successful in their recovery.

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