

Dunn County: Innovative Criminal Justice Collaborating Council celebrates 15th anniversary

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MENOMONIE — An innovative approach to making Dunn County’s criminal justice system as effective as possible celebrates its 15-year anniversary in May.

“The approach we took is evidenced-based decision making,” said Sara Benedict, Dunn County criminal justice director, about the underpinning of the Dunn County Criminal Justice Collaborating Council, which was created by the County Board in May 2008.

“The Council was formed in response to Dunn County’s need to assess the effectiveness of the criminal justice system in the county and explore ways to improve community safety, reduce recidivism by offenders and reduce systemic costs,” the CJCC said in a recent annual report to the County Board.

The mission of the CJCC, the report continued, “is to collaborate between stakeholders to improve the effectiveness of Dunn County’s criminal justice system.”

As Benedict explained it, former county Judge Bill Stewart led the effort that resulted in the county creating both the CJCC and the Drug Treatment Court. Stewart wanted to infuse the county’s criminal justice system with those rehabilitation practices, and both the CJCC and Drug Treatment Court were born.

“Judge Stewart had a vocational rehabilitation background,” Benedict said. “Essentially, he was a counselor in his first career before he went into law.

“It sounded like there were painful meetings after meetings,” Benedict added, “but

he did essentially get the CJCC going” with the support of then County Board Chair Steve Rassmussen.

The list of CJCC members includes all the county judges, Menomonie and UW-Stout chiefs of police, sheriff, county manager, County Board members, district attorney, county Department of Human Services director, Public Health director, Victim/Witness coordinator and others. The CJCC Executive Committee sets the overall direction of the council and monitors progress.

“A lot of what we do,” Benedict said, “is a lot of tracking crime problems that are in the community and then looking at strategies to improve public safety, reduce the recidivism of offenders and really make Dunn County a safer place to be.”

Programs that fall within the umbrella of the CJCC include the Treatment Opportunity Program aimed at offenders who have drug and/or alcohol problems. The program, which lasts six to 12 months, uses comprehensive case management, treatment and drug testing to give the offender a chance to avert jail time and even have their charges dismissed.

This program, supported by a state Treatment, Alternative and Diversion grant, is aimed at individuals who have committed crimes “that have some sort of connection or nexus to substance abuse,” Benedict said.

In 2022, 43 individuals were served by the county TOP program, with 15 “graduating,” 10 were terminated from the program, and 18 were still in the program, according to the annual report. The program has an overall completion rate of 61 percent.

A level up from the TOP program is the CJCC Treatment Court, intended for individuals assessed to be a high risk to reoffend and needing alcohol/drug treatment. Lasting 15 to 24 months, treatment court includes intensive supervision, case management, treatment and drug testing.

Treatment court, Benedict said, “is really for high-risk, high-need individuals who are in the criminal justice system with felony level charges. So, these are our most difficult, complex individuals who are repeatedly cycling through the system with at least a felony level charge.”

This program has an overall graduation rate of 50 percent. More significantly, since

treatment court began in 2008 – which means it is celebrating its 15th anniversary as well – 82 percent of program graduates had no convictions a year after graduation; 49 percent, three years after graduation; and 61 percent, five years after graduation. These results are on par with national results, Benedict said.

Other programs under the CJCC include Family Treatment Court; Moral Reconciliation Therapy; Pre-Trial Assessment Services; COMPAS-R and Other Assessment Services; Treatment in Jail Grant administration and Law Enforcement Deflection Grant administration.

Eric Atkinson, the new Menomonie city administrator, is the former Menomonie police chief and says the CJCC has improved the criminal justice system in the county.

“The CJCC provides an environment to learn about the various evidence-based practices that improve outcomes for people impacted by the criminal justice system” Atkinson said. “The CJCC improves the efficiency and effectiveness of law enforcement in Dunn County through various training opportunities that might not normally be experienced due to budgetary restrictions.”

Atkinson credited the tremendous support of the Dunn County Board for the success of the CJCC to this point.

“The level of commitment by the Dunn County Board of Supervisors is unparalleled compared to other communities I’ve experienced,” he said. “Furthermore, its longevity can also be attributed to the dedicated professionals who work within the criminal justice system.”

Atkinson also had kudos for Benedict, saying her “leadership, knowledge, and professional drive took the CJCC to heights it hasn’t ever experienced. Without question she is a role model to all criminal justice professionals.”

Benedict, who has been with the CJCC for 10 years, said the effort went through a strategic planning process after she arrived, and “that really helped us retool the CJCC to make it more effective. We really tried to listen to our members and identify what we should be focusing on. And that was improving our local criminal justice system.”

Members “had a list of different things that we wanted to improve,” she continued,

including better risk and other screenings to identify those needing services, “and use the research that is out there in the world. There’s 30 years of research on the criminal justice population on what works and what doesn’t work. It’s really taking that research and trying to apply it to our local population and the challenges that we’re facing.”

Atkinson said he believes the CJCC is well positioned to keep the criminal justice system in Dunn County as effective as possible: “I believe the CJCC will play a critical role in analyzing the data of arrested and incarcerated persons to ensure the local criminal justice system is not engaging in practices that cause unintended harm.”