

2014 Nomination for the Northeast Region – Union County

The Union County CJAB conducted its inaugural meeting on September 15, 2006, with former County President Judge Harold Woelfel, Jr., serving as temporary Chair. Judge Woelfel, the driving force behind the creation of the Union County CJAB, decided to form the advisory board as result of a meeting with another group, the Union County's Drug and Alcohol Prevention-Community Action Team (DAP-CAT). DAP-CAT was comprised of various members of the community and grew out of a shared concern over the increased use of controlled substances throughout the central Susquehanna Valley.

After meeting regularly for several months, DAP-CAT decided to invite members of the criminal justice system to participate in what organizers called a brainstorming event to identify potential solutions to ever-growing problems related to drug and alcohol abuse and addiction.

One solution was establishing a drug treatment court. Judge Woelfel quickly recognized the need to form a CJAB to help create the problem solving court and consequently, the Union County CJAB was founded in November 2006.

With support from the CJAB, the 17th Judicial District Treatment Court began in July 2007, with Drug Court enrolling its first participants on July 2, 2008, and holding its first graduation on May 19, 2010. The DUI Court enrolled its first participants on January 13, 2010, and held its first graduation on March 30, 2011.

In September 2012, the 17th District Treatment Court received its state accreditation, becoming the fourth treatment court in the Commonwealth to achieve such recognition.

As the Union County CJAB developed, prison overcrowding was identified as one of the most critical issues challenging the county. The Union County Prison has 35 beds and lacks facilities for programming. It is outdated and unable to house the average daily inmate population of 70 offenders. As a result, Union County's budget includes \$1 million annually to pay for the out-of-county housing of inmates, with most jailed in neighboring Snyder County at a cost of \$72 a day per inmate.

The Union County CJAB formed a sub-committee to address prison overcrowding and visited the Franklin County Prison and Day Reporting Center (DRC). After meeting with Franklin County, the sub-committee agreed that a DRC was a viable option for addressing Union County's prison overcrowding and just as significant, would have a positive impact on recidivism rates among probationers and parolees.

Union County acquired a U.S. Army Reserves facility, donated to the county by the federal government, to house the DRC. The property also includes a five acre parcel of land suitable for agricultural development. The long-term plan includes assigning some offenders to developing the land for planting and harvesting crops. DRC staff believes this project will not only provide an additional community service worksite for the DRC, but allow offenders to develop job skills while providing a source of food for the county's jail and possibly a source of revenue for the county through the sale of surplus food.

Modeled after the Franklin County DRC, the Union County DRC opened in the spring of 2012, providing intensive case management coupled with treatment, educational, and employment services along with Electronic Monitoring and drug and alcohol (D & A) screening. Offenders participate in structured programming including GED classes, parenting and anger management sessions, D&A counseling, job development/job search assistance, computer training, and support to reunify families.

At the end of 2013, there were approximately 40 offenders sentenced to the DRC. In addition, the county has built upon the early success of the DRC by partnering with Bucknell University to use volunteer students to teach offenders life skills classes.

Union County CJAB is one of only three CJABs in the Northeast region that have members from their local Housing Authority actively participating on their Boards. Their three County Commissioners are involved with the CJAB, one specifically appointed to work closely with the criminal justice system. The Commissioners' approach is receptive of innovative thinking to save the county and residents tax dollars while supporting offenders in successfully reintegrating into the community.

Continuing to work towards easing prison overcrowding, the Union County Housing Authority (UCHA) worked with the CJAB to design a unique experimental rental assistance/housing program called Justice Bridge Housing Program (JBHP). Organizers felt the housing program could help alleviate overcrowding while providing stable housing opportunities to participants.

In July 2012, UCHA was awarded a PCCD grant, under the Mental Health and Justice Housing Initiative funding announcement, for \$71,896, to help support JBHP and provide supportive housing for a projected six justice-involved participants diagnosed with serious mental illness and/or substance abuse disorder. The primary housing objective of JBHP is to provide rental assistance quickly, eventually facilitating the transition of the participant into permanent housing through federal Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV).

As of late 2013, four participants are in JBHP. According to organizers, they are all progressing well with their re-entry. One participant has secured full-time employment with benefits and the others have all secured part-time work. The approximate cost to operate JBHP is \$22 per day versus \$70 a day to house one offender in the county prison.

The JBHP demonstrates a potential for replication in other public housing authorities across the Commonwealth and across the country. As a result, UCHA applied for and received a Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) grant to develop a toolkit targeted to public housing authorities to develop and administer their own justice bridge housing programs.

The Union County CJAB continues to work towards alleviating prison overcrowding by expanding their Day Reporting Center and Justice Bridge Housing Program but they also continue to look forward. In March of 2014, they will host the PA Mental Health and Justice Center of Excellence to hold a Cross-systems Mapping workshop.

Over the summer of 2014, CJAB Officers plan to conduct a board assessment, along with a strategic planning session, where together with the results of the Cross-systems Mapping workshop, CJAB members will identify and prioritize new goals for the CJAB to work towards.

Union County CJAB aims to be a role model for not only rural counties, but everyone across the Commonwealth. They hope to learn from their unique housing program and newly opened DRC and share their growing experiences and accomplishments with other counties and help counties replicate successful programming.

It is because of these accomplishments and collaborations that PCCD Staff nominates the Union County CJAB for the 2014 County Commissioners' Association of Pennsylvania CJAB Best Practices Award.