

DHS
MAKING AN
Impact

MENTAL HEALTH COURT

We frequently hear from the people we serve, often with thanks for turning their lives around, but few are as compelling as the anonymous letter I received recently from a “graduate” of Mental Health Court. Please take a moment to read it, in the abridged version below, as well as the equally moving account of Robert McWhite’s arduous struggle for “freedom.”

Our Mental Health Court, the first in Pennsylvania, is less than a decade old but it has shown dramatically that, for nonviolent offenders with mental illness, treatment is far more effective and more economical than incarceration. In the long run, a “problem-solving” judicial system with adequate supports saves lives and millions of dollars.

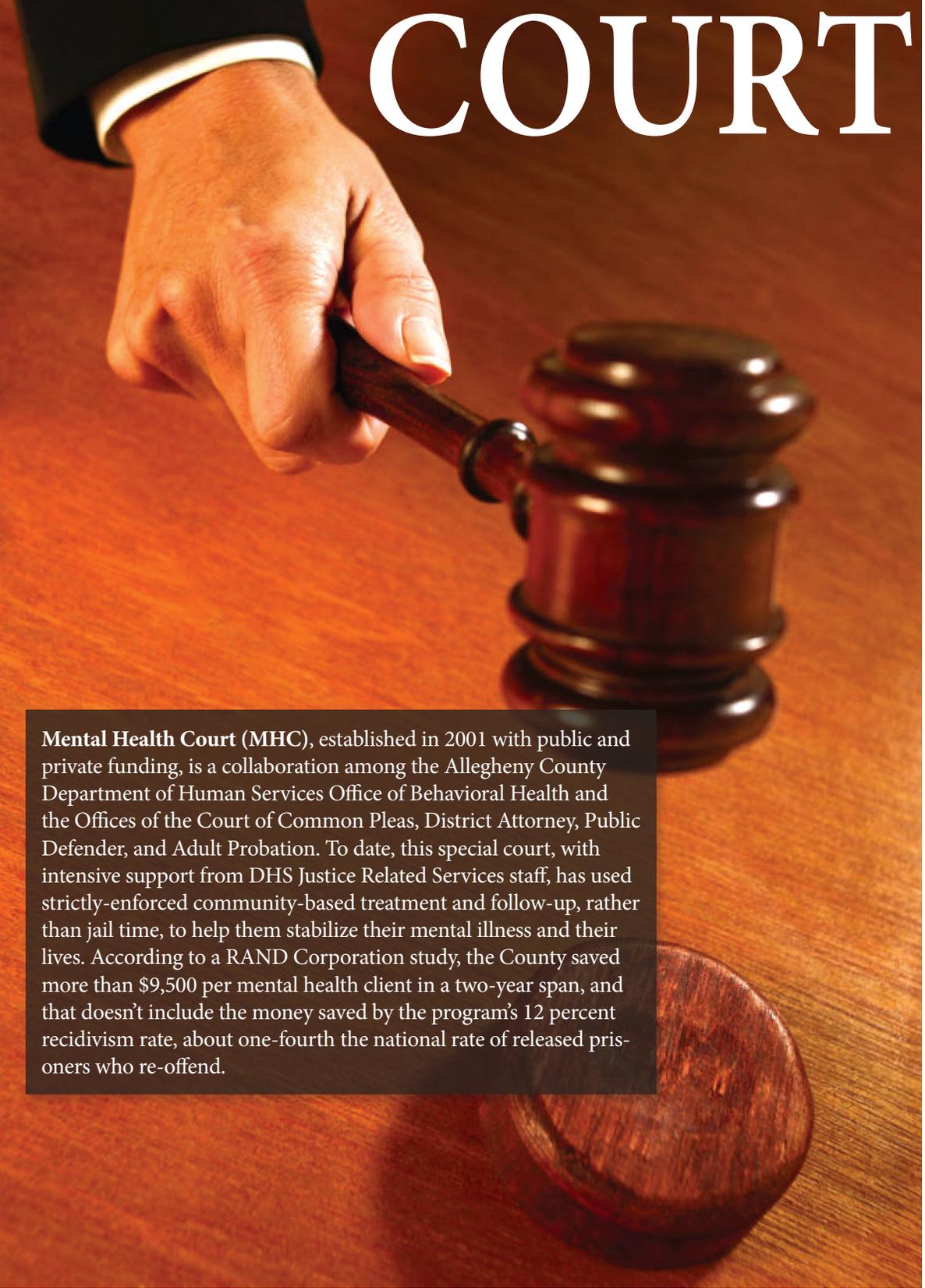
To learn more about Mental Health Court and DHS Justice-Related Services, visit our web site (www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/) or call 412-350-7337.



Marc Cherna
Director, Allegheny County
Department of Human Services

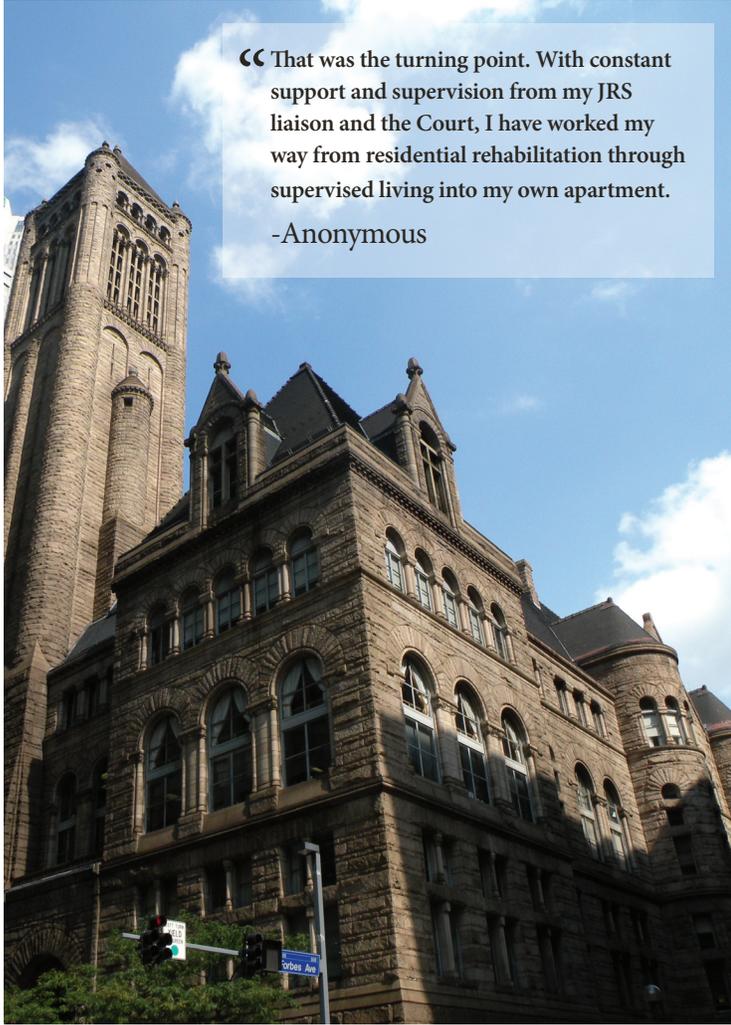


Dan Onorato
Allegheny County Executive



Mental Health Court (MHC), established in 2001 with public and private funding, is a collaboration among the Allegheny County Department of Human Services Office of Behavioral Health and the Offices of the Court of Common Pleas, District Attorney, Public Defender, and Adult Probation. To date, this special court, with intensive support from DHS Justice Related Services staff, has used strictly-enforced community-based treatment and follow-up, rather than jail time, to help them stabilize their mental illness and their lives. According to a RAND Corporation study, the County saved more than \$9,500 per mental health client in a two-year span, and that doesn't include the money saved by the program's 12 percent recidivism rate, about one-fourth the national rate of released prisoners who re-offend.

“This is one person’s story – my story – about how the Allegheny County Mental Health Court (MHC) – saved one life.” That’s how the anonymous letter to DHS Director Marc Cherna began. By telling his own story, the writer – a “graduate” of MHC – also tells the story of this remarkable “problem-solving” court. Here, abridged, is his letter:



“That was the turning point. With constant support and supervision from my JRS liaison and the Court, I have worked my way from residential rehabilitation through supervised living into my own apartment.”
-Anonymous

“I was arrested in March of 2005 following a police chase [for] a raft of serious but non-violent offenses. I had been in treatment at a methadone clinic, off medication for my bipolar disorder, and abusing other drugs. After two months in jail, I was placed in a rehab followed by a halfway house. In part because of my compliance and progress in rehab, the DA and the court took a chance and accepted my case into Mental Health Court.

“I wish that I could end the story with a ‘happily ever after’ at this point. But recovery from mental health and substance abuse problems is not a linear process. After a year, I relapsed, completed three rehab programs, and continued to struggle, picking up several new misdemeanor charges. I became resigned to a short life alternating between incarceration and addiction. I stopped seeing my probation officer and my Justice Related Services (JRS) liaison. That’s when MHC reluctantly put out a warrant for my arrest. Their intent was not punitive; they knew that I was at-risk in multiple ways.

“After three weeks in jail, I appeared in Judge Zottola’s courtroom in county reds and shackles. He looked at me and said, ‘I’m very disappointed in you.’

“Those words cut me. Judge Zottola cared about me enough to be disappointed.

“I replied, ‘Not nearly as disappointed as I am in myself.’

“That was the turning point. With constant support and supervision from my JRS liaison and the Court, I have worked my way from residential rehabilitation through supervised living into my own apartment. I have a job in my field. I have taken responsibility for my own recovery from dual disorders and have gradually come to need fewer and fewer supportive services. In short, I have made an incredibly long journey to a healthy, happy, productive life.

“The success of problem-solving courts has been indisputably proven by both research and by the anecdotal evidence of cases like mine. But they only work when they have the resources – human, economic, and judicial – to do so. These programs produce cost savings to law enforcement, the courts, and society at large, and in the process they can produce amazing life-improving results for seemingly hopeless cases – like mine.”

The two padlocks Robert McWhite wears around his neck are reminders that nearly half of his 37 years have been spent locked up – by the justice system, addiction, homelessness, or mental illness. They are also reminders of how sweet his new-found freedom is. For McWhite, the key was Mental Health Court.

Like the author of the anonymous letter, incarceration for drug use and theft to support his habit had no impact because his overarching problem was mental illness – in his case post-traumatic stress disorder. Mistaken for a would-be robber, McWhite had a gun pressed to his forehead before being shot in the leg. Those minutes of terror stretched into years of nightmares and fear of the dark and of other people. His only relief came from his self-medication: heroin, crack, and marijuana.

After his last arrest in July 2006, at the urging of his Public Defender, McWhite was assigned to Mental Health Court, where he was sentenced to three months of house arrest and a year of probation. He enjoyed – indeed, continues to enjoy – the weekly sessions in Judge Zottola’s court where defendants tell their stories, offering mutual support and hugs to others who are struggling. A successful MHC graduate, he’s free now – in his own apartment with fish tanks and a terrarium, and he’s determined to help others find their own way to freedom. He’s writing a book about his experience, and performing in a play about the street life, “Death of a Baller,” that is performed by in church and community venues. He would like to start a telephone hotline for addicts and find more opportunities to speak to children and youth.

He sees his own change as a metamorphosis – like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. It’s not yet complete, he knows, but he’s grateful for the progress he has made and to those who have helped him along the way like his JRS liaison, who gave him both support and direction. “I couldn’t just ski down the river,” he said. “I had to climb some mountains.”