

Choices:

A Substance Abuse Recovery Program at the St. Louis County Jail

by
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Choices is a substance abuse recovery program operated in the St. Louis County Jail by staff from the St. Louis County Department of Justice Services (DJS). The program, which began serving clients in August 1998, consists of a 90-day psychoeducational treatment program that incorporates the 12-step recovery program. Choices counselors also provide education and support to family and friends of Choices clients, as well as after-care sessions for clients who have completed Choices and are living in the community. The program is available to 30 male inmates and 15 female inmates at a time, and new groups of clients are accepted four times each year. Judges sentence inmates to the program for 90-day shock incarceration, or clients can participate in the program as a portion of a longer sentence.

At the end of each year of the program, a university professor conducts an evaluation of the program in cooperation with staff from Choices, DJS, and the regional offices of the Missouri State Board of Probation and Parole. Following are selected findings from the evaluation report that ended with Year 7 of the program in August 2005.

Clients Served

Between its inception in August 1998 and August 2005, 1,639 clients were admitted into Choices. The average age of these clients was 32 years. Ages have ranged from 17 to 80 years, with one-third under the age of 25. Nearly one-quarter have been women. Most clients have been Caucasian (52%) or African American (46%), and 2% were of other races. Sixty-three percent (63%) had never been married.

The Choices program serves an at-risk population:

- Most clients have severe substance abuse problems;

- Nearly two-thirds have participated unsuccessfully in substance abuse treatment before entering Choices;
- More than half of clients have parents or guardians who abused substances;
- More than one-quarter of clients have mental health problems in addition to substance abuse problems;
- Many clients (36%), particularly women, report a history of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; and
- Almost half of Choices clients do not have a high school education or its equivalent.

The most frequent crimes for which clients were admitted to Choices included probation violations (49%), possession of a controlled substance (23%), driving while intoxicated (17%), drug trafficking (15%), stealing (14%), and burglary (10%). Most clients had serious substance abuse problems, with 39% of clients assessed to have a serious alcohol problem and 84% assessed to have a serious drug abuse problem.

Program Evaluation Shows Evidence of Success

Among the 1,588 clients who were discharged from Choices by August 9, 2005, 90% successfully completed the program. Among these 1,435 clients who successfully completed Choices and were released into the community during its first 7 years, 83% were placed on probation. As a part of the annual program evaluation, probation officers are asked to complete follow-up forms with information on clients' substance use, treatment participation, and success on probation during their first year in the community.

During Program Years 3 through 6, probation officers completed follow-up forms for 456 of the 797 clients (57%) who successfully completed Choices and were released from jail on probation. Among this sample of clients, 71% were required to participate in community-based substance abuse treatment as a condition of probation. Ninety-five percent (95%) of clients who had substance abuse treatment as a condition of probation participated in treatment, compared to only 48% of those who were not required to participate in treatment as a condition of probation. Thus, including treatment as a condition of probation significantly increased the number of clients who participated in a treatment program.

Overall, 81% of the sample of clients who successfully completed Choices and were released on probation participated in one or more types of substance abuse treatment and support services during their first year in the community. Types of programming including outpatient counseling (63%); substance abuse support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous (53%); other types of support groups (14%); and inpatient treatment (12%).

To measure program success, the Choices evaluation measured three outcomes for clients who successfully completed the Choices program and then were released and placed on probation. The outcomes measured were substance use, success on probation, and arrests.

- **Substance use following release from Choices**—In the sample of 456 clients released on probation, probation officers reported evidence of drug or alcohol use among 50% of the clients during their first year in the community following successful completion of Choices. Overall, marijuana was used by 22% of these clients; cocaine and other stimulants by 21% of clients; alcohol by 14% of clients; heroin and other opiates by 8% of clients; and hallucinogens, depressants, and inhalants by fewer than 1% of clients.
- **Success on probation**—Among clients who successfully completed the program and were released during Year 6, 90% of clients did not have their probation revoked or suspended during their first year in the community. Overall, 83% of clients released during Years 1 through 6 have been successful on probation.
- **Arrests**—Arrests were tallied among clients who successfully completed the program and were released during Program Years 2 through 6. Included were arrests for new criminal acts that occurred within the clients' first year in the community. Excluded were arrests for probation revocation or suspension for technical violations. Among clients who successfully completed the program and were released during Year 6, 71% of clients were not arrested in their first year in the community. Among those clients who were arrested (28%), 12% were arrested for misdemeanor offenses, 13% for nonviolent felonies, and 5% for violent felonies. The rate of arrest has been consistent over time. Overall, 71% of clients who successfully completed the program and were released during Program Years 2 through 6 were not arrested during their first year in the community..

Not surprisingly, clients who actively participated in some kind of substance abuse treatment were less likely to be arrested during their first year in the community after they successfully completed Choices. For example, among clients who attended substance abuse support groups, 17% were arrested, compared to 58% among clients who did not participate regularly and 33% among clients who were not referred to a group. Sixteen percent (16%) of clients who successfully completed outpatient treatment were arrested, compared to 54% who did not complete outpatient treatment and 27% who were not referred.

These outcomes measuring substance use, success on probation, and arrests suggest that Choices has given inmates the chance to break the cycle and downward spiral of substance abuse and addiction, and many clients have succeeded. In fact, over the course of its first 7 years, Choices has continued to graduate a high percentage of its participants. In Program Year 7, 93% of clients successfully completed the program. Overall, 90% of clients successfully completed the program during its first 7 years.

Another indication of program success is that, when faced with budget cuts, Choices was able to adapt its program by reducing the number of clients it could serve. After this cutback, the program was able to continue serving clients by applying for, and receiving, a federal grant through the Missouri Department of Public Safety. The grant was renewed for a second year during Program Year 7. Even with this grant, however, the program is at less than half of its previous staffing and two-thirds of its previous annual client capacity. The annual capacity of the program was reduced from 300 to 180 inmates.

Client Stories

Following are three stories of men and women who have completed the Choices program. The first two stories were submitted by Choices counselors and the third by the parent of a Choices client.

Patty was born in 1958 and had used heroin since the age of 13. She was in and out of jail over eight times throughout the years. She came to the jail most recently with a life-threatening abscess from shooting drugs and was immediately hospitalized. She completed the Choices Program on July 13, 2001, and she has been clean and sober since then. Patty is currently in her last year at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, and she is the first former inmate to complete a school practicum at Choices. She is now a counselor at a drug rehabilitation center, and she has recently traveled to New York to speak on behalf of reforming criminal drug laws.

Mike entered the Choices Program in October 2002. He had been addicted to alcohol for over 7 years, and he was a very successful businessman, earning over six figures. After his third arrest for Driving While Intoxicated, Mike entered the program sad, angry, and depressed. Mike's family became involved and met with Mike and the counselors at the jail. After Mike graduated, he attended the Choices Aftercare Program as well as AA meetings. He is now working on his MBA, still attending AA, and has begun to help other struggling addicts.

My son, Brian, was a gifted athlete, and he was fulfilling his dream playing on Wayne Gretzky's major junior team in Canada. He was ready to sign a contract to play professional hockey when he was seriously injured in a game and his career was suddenly over. I watched in horror as my son's emotional pain turned to debilitating addiction. When he was sentenced to the Choices Program at the county jail, I blamed myself and thought that they would destroy Brian. The Choices Program has instead enlightened him to realize his potential to not only survive, but to overcome and succeed. Brian's struggles are not over. He gets scared, but he knows now when to ask for support and where to find the right kind of support. He has a new job and he even works a second job some evenings as a hockey referee. (Imagine that!) Thank you for giving me my son back.

Evaluation Recommendations

Along with its strengths, Choices has faced a range of challenges that required ongoing attention and action. The following recommendations, which were included in the Choices Year 7 evaluation, illustrate some of these challenges.

- **Increase staff training**—Because Choices clients do not have a separate living unit, all staff, including correctional officers, should receive training on substance abuse and its treatment in a jail setting.
- **Continue to monitor client demographics**—Referrals of African American male clients to Choices declined when the program reduced its annual capacity from 300 clients annually to 180. The percentage of African American clients declined from 45% in Year 2 to 23% in Year 7. The sharpest decline has occurred since Choices reorganized to a 90-day program. All parties involved in referring and sentencing clients to Choices should be made aware of this demographic change.
- **Continue to work closely with probation officers**—It is important to work with probation officers, both to ensure continuity of services for clients when they return to the community and to increase officers' completion of the follow-up surveys needed to evaluate the program.
- **Refer former clients to substance abuse support groups**—Increase the participation of former Choices clients in substance abuse support groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. These groups appear to be an underutilized resource for Choices clients returning to the community. There is no charge for such groups, and they are located throughout the St. Louis metropolitan area. In addition, among the sample of former Choices clients placed on probation, clients who actively participated in these groups were much less likely to use substances, to have their probation revoked or suspended, or to be arrested in the 1-year period after successful completion of Choices. Despite these known positive outcomes, 47% of probationers are not referred to such support groups.
- **Continue to work with clients to increase job and education opportunities**—Continue to provide, and possibly further promote, employment and education opportunities for Choices clients, as engagement in these activities is one of the strongest predictors of community success.
- **Collaborate with additional community-based agencies**—Explore the creation of more relationships with community-based agencies that support the services that Choices provides and can provide services to clients whose needs are beyond the capabilities of Choices.
- **Identify additional funding**—Continue to explore alternative funding sources so the program does not have to rely solely on St. Louis County to operate and can provide services to more people who could benefit from participation in Choices. ■

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