

*O.C.G.A. § 15-1-16*

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\*\*\* Current Through the 2015 Regular Session \*\*\*

TITLE 15. COURTS  
CHAPTER 1. GENERAL PROVISIONS

O.C.G.A. § 15-1-16 (2015)

§ 15-1-16. Mental health court divisions

(a) As used in this Code section, the term:

(1) "Developmental disability" shall have the same meaning as set forth in Code Section 37-1-1.

(2) "Mental illness" shall have the same meaning as set forth in Code Section 37-1-1.

(3) "Risk and needs assessment" means an actuarial tool, approved by the Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia and validated on a targeted population, scientifically proven to determine a person's risk to recidivate and to identify criminal risk factors that, when properly addressed, can reduce that person's likelihood of committing future criminal behavior.

(b) (1) To achieve a reduction in recidivism and symptoms of mental illness among mentally ill offenders in criminal cases and to increase their likelihood of successful rehabilitation through early, continuous, and intense judicially supervised treatment, any court that has jurisdiction over a criminal case in which a defendant has a mental illness or developmental disability, or a co-occurring mental illness and substance abuse disorder, may establish a mental health court division to provide an alternative to the traditional judicial system for disposition of such cases. A mental health court division will bring together mental health professionals, local social programs, and intensive judicial monitoring.

(2) In any criminal case in which a defendant suffers from a mental illness or developmental disability, or a co-occurring mental illness and substance abuse disorder, and the defendant meets the eligibility criteria for the mental health court division, the court may refer the case to the mental health court division:

(A) Prior to the entry of the sentence, if the prosecuting attorney consents;

(B) As part of a sentence in a case; or

(C) Upon consideration of a petition to revoke probation.

(3) Each mental health court division shall establish a planning group to develop a written work plan. The planning group shall include judges, prosecuting attorneys, sheriffs or their designees, public defenders, community supervision officers, and persons having expertise in the field of mental health. The work plan shall address the operational, coordination, resource, information management, and evaluation needs of the mental health court division. The work plan shall include mental health court division policies and practices related to implementing the standards and practices developed pursuant to paragraph (4) of this subsection. The work plan shall ensure a risk and needs assessment is used to identify the likelihood of recidivating and identify the needs that, when met, reduce recidivism. The work plan shall ensure that mental health court division eligibility shall be focused on moderate-risk and high-risk offenders as determined by a risk and needs assessment. The mental health court division shall combine judicial supervision, treatment of mental health court division participants, and drug and mental health testing. Defendants charged with murder, murder in the second degree, armed robbery, rape, aggravated sodomy, aggravated sexual battery, aggravated child molestation, or child molestation shall not be eligible for entry into the mental health court division, except in the case of a separate court supervised reentry program designed to more closely monitor mentally ill offenders returning to the community after having served a term of incarceration. Any such court supervised community reentry program for mentally ill offenders shall be subject to the work plan as provided for in this paragraph.

(4) (A) The Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia shall establish standards and practices for mental health court divisions taking into consideration guidelines and principles based on current research and findings published by expert organizations, including, but not limited to, the United States Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Council of State Governments Consensus Project, and the National GAINS Center, relating to practices shown to reduce recidivism of offenders with mental illness or developmental disabilities. Standards and practices shall include, but shall not be limited to, the use of a risk and needs assessment to identify the likelihood of recidivating and identify the needs that, when met, reduce recidivism. The Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia shall update its standards and practices to incorporate research, findings, and developments in the mental health court field. Each mental health court division shall adopt policies and practices that are consistent with the standards and practices published by the Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia.

(B) The Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia shall provide technical assistance to mental health court divisions to assist them with the implementation of policies and practices, including, but not limited to, guidance on the implementation of risk and needs assessments in mental health court divisions.

(C) The Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia shall create and manage a certification and peer review process to ensure mental health court divisions are adhering to the Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia's standards and practices and shall create a waiver process for mental health court divisions to seek an exception to the Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia's standards and practices. In order to receive state appropriated funds, any mental health court division established on and after July 1, 2013, shall be certified pursuant to this subparagraph or, for good cause shown to the Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia, shall receive a waiver from the Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia.

(D) On and after July 1, 2013, the award of any state funds for a mental health court division shall be conditioned upon a mental health court division attaining certification or a waiver by the Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia. On or before September 1, the Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia shall publish an annual report listing certified mental health court divisions.

(E) Pursuant to Code Section 15-5-24, the Administrative Office of the Courts shall develop and manage an electronic information system for performance measurement and accept submission of performance data in a consistent format from all mental health court divisions. The Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia shall identify elements necessary for performance measurement, including, but not limited to, recidivism, the number of moderate-risk and high-risk participants in a mental health court division, drug testing results, drug testing failures, the number of participants who successfully complete the program, and the number of participants who fail to complete the program.

(F) On or before July 1, 2015, and every three years thereafter, the Council of Accountability Court Judges of Georgia shall conduct a performance peer review of the mental health court divisions for the purpose of improving mental health court division policy and practices and the certification and recertification process.

(5) The court instituting the mental health court division may request the district attorney for the judicial circuit or solicitor-general for the state court for the jurisdiction to designate one or more prosecuting attorneys to serve in the mental health court division and may request the circuit public defender, if any, to designate one or more assistant public defenders to serve in the mental health court division.

(6) The clerk of the court instituting the mental health court division or such clerk's designee shall serve as the clerk of the mental health court division.

(7) The court instituting the mental health court division may request other employees of the court to perform duties for the mental health court division. Such employees shall perform duties as directed by the judges of the mental health court division.

(8) The court instituting the mental health court division may enter into agreements with other courts and agencies for the assignment of personnel from other courts and agencies to the mental health court division, including probation supervision.

(9) Expenses for salaries, equipment, services, and supplies incurred in implementing this Code section may be paid from state funds, funds of the county or political subdivision implementing such mental health court division, federal grant funds, and funds from private donations.

(c) (1) Each mental health court division shall establish written criteria that define the successful completion of the mental health court division program.

(2) If the mental health court division participant successfully completes the mental health court division program prior to the entry of judgment, the case against the mental health court division participant may be dismissed by the prosecuting attorney.

(3) If the mental health court division participant successfully completes the mental health court division program as part of a sentence imposed by the court, the sentence of the mental health court division participant may be reduced or modified.

(4) Any plea of guilty or nolo contendere entered pursuant to this Code section shall not be withdrawn without the consent of the court.

(d) Any statement made by a mental health court division participant as part of participation in such court, or any report made by the staff of the court or program connected to the court, regarding a participant's mental health shall not be admissible as evidence against the participant in any legal proceeding or prosecution; provided, however, that if the participant violates the conditions of his or her participation in the division or is terminated from the mental health court division, the reasons for the violation or termination may be considered in sanctioning, sentencing, or otherwise disposing of the participant's case.

(e) Nothing contained in this Code section shall be construed to permit a judge to impose, modify, or reduce a sentence below the minimum sentence required by law.

(f) Notwithstanding any provision of law to the contrary, mental health court division staff shall be provided, upon request, with access to all records relevant to the treatment of the mental health court division participant from any state or local government agency, except records declared confidential by Code Section 49-5-40 to which access may be obtained pursuant to Code Section 49-5-41. All records and the contents thereof shall be treated as confidential, shall not be disclosed to any person outside of the mental health court division, and shall not be subject to Article 4 of Chapter 18 of Title 50 or subject to subpoena, discovery, or introduction into evidence in any civil or criminal proceeding. Such records and the contents thereof shall be maintained by the mental health court division and originating court in a confidential file not available to the public.

(g) Any fees received by a mental health court division from a mental health court division participant as payment for mental health treatment and services shall not be considered as court costs or a fine.

(h) The court shall have the authority to accept grants and donations and other proceeds from outside sources for the purpose of supporting the mental health court division. Any such grants, donations, or proceeds shall be retained by the mental health court division for expenses.

**HISTORY:** Code 1981, § 15-1-16, enacted by Ga. L. 2011, p. 224, § 1/SB 39; Ga. L. 2012, p. 899, § 2-2/HB 1176; Ga. L. 2014, p. 444, § 2-1/HB 271; Ga. L. 2014, p. 866, § 15/SB 340; Ga. L. 2015, p. 5, § 15/HB 90; Ga. L. 2015, p. 422, § 5-3/HB 310; Ga. L. 2015, p. 519, § 5-2/HB 328.