



COUNCIL OF ACCOUNTABILITY COURT JUDGES OF GEORGIA

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ACCOUNTABILITY COURT GRADUATIONS

CONASAUGA CIRCUIT DRUG COURT

Written by Mitch Talley, Whitfield County Director of Communications



Calvin's father pulled him out of school when he was in the sixth grade. He couldn't read or write and ran away when he was 13 years old. Life was hard, and he sometimes would eat out of dumpsters and steal things to get what he needed to survive. He hitchhiked all over the country, started doing a lot of drugs, and wound up in and out of youth detention centers, jails, and prisons. "I did not know any other way," Calvin says now, "but drugs and alcohol." About two years ago, however, Calvin's life finally took a turn in the right direction after he was accepted into the Conasauga Circuit Drug Court program. In fact, he and nine other participants in the program – Heather, Meredith, Jennifer, Tomie, Michael, Gregory, John, Eric, and Tanner - became the latest graduates from Drug Court on July 24.

Most of the first 78 such graduation ceremonies had been held in the Juror Assembly Room at the Whitfield County Courthouse, but the 79th graduation during the pandemic in May was forced to take advantage of technology and was shown only on the internet via Zoom. This time, the 80th ceremony morphed again, moving to a large meeting room at Edwards Park Community Center where graduates, staff, and guests wore masks and practiced social distancing, limited to three friends and family members in attendance.

Drug Court Judge Jim Wilbanks said he was glad to see a record number of graduates complete the program during trying times. "Some programs just stopped - some programs have done not much of anything because they didn't think they could be successful and continue with some high level of intensive treatment in this virus setting," Wilbanks said. "We made the decision – we being my amazing staff and team – that was not going to be us, so we have continued to do this program and move forward by using Zoom and some other individual counseling happening outside the Accountability Court building."

Of course, Drug Court participants have grown accustomed to adversity in their lives. Take Meredith, for example. "I had never had any rehabilitation or professional help after my husband, best friend, then my Daddy died in just a few short months of each other," she said. "My depression was dark and overwhelming. I couldn't handle the pain. I had lost all sense of self control and right or wrong. I merely lived to use and used to live." Being accepted into Drug Court wasn't an automatic path to redemption, however. "I entered Drug Court on a Thursday and made it through my first class on Friday morning and was back in county jail by Friday afternoon and headed to RSAT (Residential Substance Use Treatment Program, a nine-month program which targets high risk, high needs offenders in a correctional institution setting). "While that wasn't the preferred way, the result has proven to be worth it for Meredith. "Somewhere along the way, I began to smile again," she said. "I began to trust this group of women and this Drug Court staff with my pain. I opened up. I found a sponsor in NA (Narcotics Anonymous) and began working the steps. The lost girl that entered Drug Court in December of 2017, the girl with no identity, no hope, no love, no control, no happiness or joy, now

stands before you as a woman with self-esteem, self-love, boundaries, goals, hopes and dreams, respect, honesty, joy and unfaltering faith in my God above. True peace and happiness were once again mine!"

Heather, meanwhile, says her early recovery was also very challenging because she came into the program thinking she was going to do what she wanted and didn't really need any help. "I just didn't want to be in jail," she admitted. "However, my attitude towards the program, as well as my behaviors, led me once again to that very place. Sanction after sanction led me to RSAT." She came back from RSAT "a changed and determined woman" with "the strength to move forward in my recovery" and today is thankful for once more being a part of her child's life, a "wonderful" NA program, and able to set realistic and accomplishable goals.



Jennifer also spent time at RSAT because she was "really rebellious about giving up my old ways," she said, admitting that "lying and manipulation were part of my life," making entry into the recovery program difficult. After "a few bumps in the road," she's grateful for the Drug Court team that never gave up on her, leading her to a different life where she has a strong bond with family members like her little sister, niece and nephew, a close friendship with her sponsor, and a welcome place in her home group. Cutting off contact with others who are a bad influence is part of the program. In fact, Tomie says she had to spend time at PDC because her mother, also an addict, contacted her. "Upon entering (Drug Court), my parents were no-contacts," Tomie said. "I didn't realize at the time that this would be a challenge for me and eventually a setback. Both my parents are addicts. I had to go 11 months without talking to or being able to see my two sons. This was the longest I've ever been away from (them)." After completing the program, she calls her life "beautiful" and is grateful she can call her sons and is in the process of going back to school. As she puts it, "I set goals for myself and I achieve those goals."

Eric, on the other hand, says he didn't suffer from such a traumatic childhood. "I had parents who loved and nurtured me unconditionally and worked hard to make sure my sister and I had everything we needed and most everything we wanted," he said. "Parents who instilled strong morals and values and taught me to the best of their ability how to be a man. Parents who made sure I was in church, to expose me to the most wholesome ways to live in order to form the happiest life possible in a manner that was pleasing to God." Unfortunately, right after high school, after being sheltered for so long, his curiosity got the best of him, Eric admits, and he began experimenting with alcohol and drugs. "I didn't recognize the danger," he said. "I thought that a drug addict was a weak-willed, spineless creature who must have no purpose in life or sense of worth. I would not, or could not fall into that trap, as I was an achiever, winning at the game of life and felt to have such great potential. But I was wrong."

Experimentation quickly led to abuse, and it didn't take long for Eric to realize his world was crumbling around him. Despite time in jail and prison and a trip to a 30-day inpatient treatment center, he remained "trapped and helpless" in addiction for more than 20 years. His wake-up call finally came when he wrecked his vehicle on Dec. 10, 2017 with a massive amount of drugs inside. "The difference this time was a 10-year-old daughter who desperately needed me," he said. "I remember sitting in jail feeling desperate and alone facing not being able to wake up for Christmas with my family for the first time in my daughter's life. How could I do this to her? I wasn't raised this way. My parents never put me through it. How could I do this to her? I was consumed with guilt and remember praying to God and pleading for forgiveness and help. Here I was, after so many years running from Him, in a cold prison cell sending up foxhole prayers begging for just one more chance."

Those prayers were answered in February 2018 when Eric was accepted into Drug Court. "I made a deal and commitment with God that day to become the dad my daughter deserves, the son my parents deserve, and the man I deserve," he said. "So, surrender came easy for me. Recovery was a smooth transition for me because I wanted to change. I was tired of being sick and tired and was ready to live." Eric says he knew he was in the right place when he felt God's favor on him again. "For the first time since I was a little boy, I had honesty, acceptance, joy, freedom, courage, willingness, love and humility," he said. Eric expressed thanks to his fellow participants, grateful for the close relationships he has formed as he realized they also experienced the same feelings, sense of loss, doom, and degradation he had. "They too had been helpless, hopeless, and beaten down by the same hideous monster as me," he said.

Like the other nine graduates, Eric also appreciates the dedicated and committed Drug Court staff. "Every one of you really have our best interests at heart and want us to succeed," he said. "Since entering Drug Court, each one of you have been instrumental in helping me reach huge milestones such as getting out of a toxic marriage. You helped mold me into a man deserving enough to gain full custody of my daughter, you helped me quit smoking, get my license back. I'm a homeowner. I proudly work hard as I can at a small family business right beside my dad every day. I have a truck and a motorcycle paid off, and I maintain a checking and savings account."

Michael, on the other hand, could have blamed his drug-addicted parents for turning him into an addict, too, but he candidly admits that he became an addict “because I made a choice to do so.” Five years before entering Drug Court, he had gotten clean in a treatment program but didn’t remain so because he didn’t set boundaries “from the people that I hung out with, from the music I listened to, and from the places I would go,” he admits now. “Because of not setting these boundaries, I began to have those feelings again,” he said. “I began to start drinking alcohol again. Shortly after that, I started using meth again. At that time, I relapsed, and it was worse than ever before. I found myself locked up again in the same place that I had been before.”

Michael says he hit rock-bottom in jail when his grandmother – “the one person that really loved me and set an example before me” – passed away. But then another family member stepped into the picture. Michael’s cousin was married to the pastor of a local church, and they welcomed Michael to the flock and offered the accountability that he needed for recovery. “The Drug Court program taught me how to speak up, how to read and set boundaries,” he said. “I was able to put the things that I was taught going through the program in practice around my family and church that helped me build trusting relationships. It also helped me to get out of my comfort zone.” Now, his hope for fellow Drug Court participants is that they reach the point where they surrender to the program. “Understand that you can’t be one way in the meetings and another way on the sidewalk,” he said. “You must accept the fact that you will not be successful unless you hang around sober people. I would encourage you to find a church family that will support you and be around people that will hold you accountable.”

Gregory, meanwhile, says he was in a miserably vicious cycle, with the extent of his day consumed by his quest to make sure he didn’t run out of drugs. The last of many arrests landed him in Judge Wilbanks’ courtroom, he says, and that twist of fate allowed him “to examine the course of my life and the best ways to correct those behaviors.” He soon learned that abandonment was a core issue for him, and he realized that his behavior was a carbon copy of his father’s behavior, making poor decisions and leaving it up to his wife to pick up the pieces. “I always vowed to never put my family through the madness and hated that I was trapped in those same patterns,” he said. “Drug Court exposed the truth, as painful as it was, the work I did around it has shaped me into the father and husband my family deserves. I’m now the man my father should have been.”

John also had many of those same core issues, saying that he grew up with an absent father and felt unworthy of being loved. “This all led to me staying in trouble in my younger years and making the wrong decisions all the way to my addiction,” he said. The program taught him to oversee his thoughts and feelings and proved to him that he can do anything he sets his mind to. “Now I can honestly say I feel that I am a productive member of society,” he said. “This program is designed to push you to your limits, to see how you react under pressure, to use the tools you’ve learned in treatment. I have learned how to be pushed and to pick my battles instead of always being argumentative. I have learned to step back, take a deep breath, and start over when I’m upset and not to give up because things get hard.”

Tanner, meanwhile, admits he was hung over on his first day of Drug Court because “I remember thinking I better get really messed up because I won’t be able to for two years.” Despite thinking that the other men in the program were “way older than me and were way ‘worse’ than me” on that first day, Tanner soon learned that “we were all the same.”

“We had an infinite appetite for drugs and alcohol that could not be satisfied,” he said, “and we were willing to follow that appetite all the way to prison or death.” His early recovery was not smooth as he was staying up all night and barely getting to Drug Court on time to take drug tests. He learned his lesson, he says, after two days in jail for being late. “I began to go to bed earlier and forced myself to wake up early to go work out before our groups every morning,” he said. “I had no self-discipline and this program forced me to grow up or go to prison. It was a rather easy choice for me. I had never been to jail sober before, and those two days were a great time of reflection for me.” He says that selfishness is the root of all his troubles and almost landed him in state prison. “I gave up my way,” he says, “because it almost destroyed me. Today the only way I stay sober is going to meetings, reading, and asking my God to give me the strength for today and thanking Him before I go to sleep. In regard to selfishness, give it up, it sucks!”

APPALACHIAN JUDICIAL CIRCUIT

Submitted by Chris Holt, Appalachian Judicial Circuit Veterans Court Coordinator

It looked a little different during COVID 19, but the Appalachian Judicial Circuit held a graduation ceremony on August 19 at the Pickens County Courthouse. The Felony Drug Court, HELP Court, and Veterans Court all participated, and there were a total of 17 graduates. Unfortunately, due to COVID 19, only the graduates and staff were able to attend the ceremony. However, the ceremony was also held on Zoom so family members, friends, and other Accountability Court participants could participate. Presiding over the ceremony was Chief Superior Court Judge Brenda S. Weaver and Superior Court Judge John Worcester. Judge Weaver presides over the Felony Drug Court and the Veterans Court while Judge Worcester presides over the HELP Court. Congratulations to all the graduates and good luck in your recovery journey!

PAULDING COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH ACCOUNTABILITY COURT

Submitted by Lauren Ortiz, Paulding County Mental Health Court Coordinator

Under the direction of Paulding County's Superior Court Judge T. David Lyles, the county's Mental Health Court inducted its first participant in January of 2019. A graduation was held on July 23, 2020 to celebrate the first graduate of the program. Our invocation was done by Ronald Coleman from Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, and the keynote speaker was Marion Beecham from NAMI Dalton, who spoke about his son's experience with mental illness.

The Paulding County Mental Health Court is an 18-month program that offers a less-costly, more-effective alternative to incarceration. It improves the response to individuals with mental illnesses who have come in contact with the criminal justice system. Participants are provided intensive outpatient mental health and substance abuse counseling, medical follow-up, frequent random drug and alcohol testing, random home visits, and strict curfew monitoring. The program provides participants assistance with obtaining employment, housing, and furthering their education. Judge Lyles conducts frequent compliance hearings to review their progress, and incentives are given to those who are meeting the program's expectations.

The team who runs the program under Judge Lyles consists of Assistant District Attorney Mike Viscuse, Public Defender Sarah Powers, Delicia Julien (LAPC Counselor), Community Supervision Officer Christy Howard, Deputy Clint Barker PCSO, and Court Coordinator Lauren Ortiz.

"As we reflect on the powerful changes that our graduate has made in the last 18 months, I look forward to seeing what she does in the next 18 years. I believe we have seen a change in her that has launched her onto a successful path to thoughtfulness, goal setting, and long-term achievements. She can do anything she sets her mind to. I am grateful that Paulding County and Judge Lyles have invested in a program that can launch new beginnings for our citizens struggling with mental health issues. Fixing a crisis starts by fixing an individual," said Sarah Powers.

"It's an absolute joy to see the participants as they grow and change each month," said Delicia Julien. "It's very rewarding!"

"Mental Health Court addresses the complex cases of justice-involved defendants with mental health conditions and often substance abuse issues. It is an amazing feeling of pride for the participant when they are able to reconnect with their families, friends, and the community in a productive, law abiding way," said Lauren Ortiz.



SUICIDE AWARENESS MONTH

Submitted by Lasheika Kassa, CACJ Treatment Fidelity Program Manager



September is National Suicide Prevention Month. All month individuals from all walks of life gather to promote awareness. This year has been especially challenging due to our current COVID-19 pandemic, which according to the CDC has been extremely hard for those suffering from depression, anxiety, and other mental health illnesses. Here are a few things to consider for National Suicide Prevention Month:

If you or someone you know is contemplating suicide, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. Someone is available to provide free and confidential support 24/7.

Seek therapy immediately. Utilize your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), if you have one available. You can also visit www.namiga.org for additional resources.

Get involved in your community organizations. Being involved can help you learn more about awareness as it relates to suicide prevention.

Offer support to those in need. Sometimes a listening ear, understanding, and empathy goes a long way in assisting loved ones.

Find ways to manage stress during this time. I have provided an article for your review. <https://www.fond.co/blog/manage-stress-during-covid-19/>.

5TH ANNUAL ACCOUNTABILITY COURT TRAINING CONFERENCE

Submitted by Kimberly Howard, CACJ Operations Administrator

The 5th annual accountability court training conference has arrived!

CACJ staff presents to you – from your home or office - a virtual training conference on September 14-16, 2020.

Please note that only registered attendees are permitted to attend the virtual conference. Coordinators, if there are registration cancellations or team member substitutions, please contact ICJE to communicate the changes.

Special highlights for the 2020 training conference are:

- ❖ Special keynote speakers on Monday, September 14.
- ❖ An awards ceremony on Tuesday, September 15 recognizing Georgia's outstanding STAR award recipients, the Data Driven Award recipient, the Judge Stephen S. Goss Mental Health Award recipient and the DUI and Mental Health Court model courts.
- ❖ Virtual wellness activities including a boogie down soundtrack, yoga, and meditation to help you navigate the day.
- ❖ Conference session materials, CEU forms, and submission instructions are located on the virtual conference website.



Below are FAQ to help you attend the virtual conference.

When is the virtual conference?

The 2020 annual training conference will still take place September 14-16, 2020 with three one-hour sessions per day. Each day will include a 90-minute lunch break and 30-minute wellness breaks.

Will we need to register to attend?

Yes, you have already registered by completing registration with ICJE! The virtual platform is linked to individual attendees' e-mail addresses used during registration with ICJE, so each person wanting to attend sessions, chat, etc. needs to be in the system to get a log-in link attached to their name. The log-in link was emailed September 1, 2020. Please flag this email, write down your password, and bookmark the conference platform's URL.

What platform will you be using?

We will be using a virtual platform; this service offers a private website to which each attendee will receive an individualized link for participation for all events. Through this platform, meeting registrants will be able to view and join sessions, ask questions via the chat box, and more.

How will the virtual platform work?

Each day of the meeting, you will log in with your direct link. From there, you will be able to see the agenda and the beginning of each session you can join. Please log in early! With over 1,200 virtual attendees, we want to ensure you have a smooth experience.

What will I need to attend virtually?

You will need a computer, laptop, or tablet (such as an iPad) and use Google Chrome or Microsoft Edge. While using a cell phone with the system is possible, it will likely not transmit properly at times of low signal. Hard-wired Internet is also recommended over Wi-Fi.

Will I need a computer with a camera? I do not have one.

No, that is not required. For all sessions, all cameras and microphones will be turned off for those not speaking.

If I have a question for the speakers during the general sessions, how do I ask it?

There will be a chat function during the sessions in which you can submit a question (or chat with other attendees). A host will be monitoring the chat box and ask the questions for you to the speakers.

If I have technical problems with the site, is there someone I can contact?

Yes, the platform will have a technical assistance icon, and Council staff will be available to help troubleshoot. Additional details for technical support will be in the conference program and conference website's home page. To help you navigate the platform with ease, an attendee guide and instructional video are available for you.

Will the presentations be recorded? Can I view everything at a later date?

Yes, we will record SELECT presentations. The recorded presentations will be available for viewing after the conference ends (expected date is October), and recordings will be available for up to 12 months after the conference ends.

FY21 DATA WEBINAR – RECORDING AND SLIDES

In case you missed it, you can still check out the FY21 Data Webinar that occurred on August 3. Presented by Rachel Gage, CACJ Certification and Special Projects Officer, and Matthew Bishop, JC/AOC Research Analyst, the webinar covered the following topics:

- Overview of statutorily mandated data points
- Overview of data reporting process
- Data collection compliance
- FY21 data collection changes
- Overview of quality assurance process
- Quick look at resources
- Q&A
- Quarterly program report
- Data driven award



To access the Power Point presentation and the recording of the webinar, please visit the CACJ website and go to the Funding page. The links are found under the Quarterly Data Reporting tab.

QUARTERLY PROGRAM REPORT AND ARCHIVE IS COMING SOON!

Coming soon, CACJ will provide judges and coordinators access to digital quarterly program reports through an online archive. The quarterly program report will reflect only data submitted by the court through their case management system for that quarter. The goal of the quarterly program report is to provide courts with timely data analyses and summaries for self-evaluation and assessment. It is important to note that the data presented is only as good as what is entered. The reports should also be used as a resource for courts to ensure data collection accuracy and completion. The Quarterly Program Report Archive will house all quarterly program reports; therefore, judges and coordinators will have access to historical reports beginning Q1 FY21. For questions related to the Quarterly Program Report Archive or program reports, or to request/change access to the Archive, please contact Rachel Gage, Certification and Special Projects Officer, at Rachel.gage@georgiacourts.gov.

OCTOBER 2020 NEWSLETTER SUBMISSIONS

Please send submission for the October 2020 newsletter to Debbie Mott (Debbie.Mott@GeorgiaCourts.gov) by Friday, September 25. If you plan to include a photo where participants can be identified, please be sure to send a signed photo consent with your submission.



Georgia Accountability Courts Job Postings – Please see the Job Postings tab (under Court Resources) on the CACJ website for information about these career opportunities:

- DeKalb County Counselor
- Hall County Mental Health Court Coordinator
- Paulding County Counselor
- Rockdale County Family Treatment Court Case Manager