

Substance Abuse Treatment

A Supervision Tool

Substance abuse treatment is a tool that helps U.S. probation and pretrial services officers supervise, or monitor, defendants and offenders in the community.

Treatment, which includes urine testing and services such as counseling and detoxification, is provided to persons who abuse illegal drugs, prescription drugs, or alcohol. These individuals either are on probation, on parole, on supervised release after being in prison, or on pretrial supervision while waiting to appear in court. Treatment is ordered either by the U.S. district court or by the U.S. Parole Commission as a condition of releasing these persons to the community.

For officers who supervise substance abusers, treatment provides the means to directly address these individuals' alcohol or drug abuse and to control their behavior. Treatment is key to enforcing the conditions set for their release, ensuring that they choose to obey the law rather than commit crime, and controlling the danger they may pose to the community.

In the case of persons under pretrial supervision, treatment also helps the officer reasonably assure that these persons return to court as required rather than fleeing.

Ideally, treatment yields benefits for substance-abusing defendants and offenders. It can motivate them to abstain from drugs or alcohol and teach them to cope without using these substances. It can reduce the risk that they will commit future crime—for instance, that they will resort to robbery or assault to support their drug use.

It can influence them to become productive members of society rather than a drain on community resources.

A National Program

The U.S. probation and pretrial services system's Substance Abuse Treatment Program (SATP) provides the framework for supervising

persons with drug problems. Administered by the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts since 1979, the SATP is a national program that guides probation and pretrial services officers in identifying and treating substance abusers. The program's goal—to promote abstinence from drugs—is achieved through close supervision, drug testing, and appropriate treatment.

In 1983, the U.S. probation and pretrial services system created substance abuse specialist positions to provide intensive supervision to substance abusers. This step allowed districts to set up specialized caseloads to meet the demands these particular cases generate.

Specialists are senior officers whose job is to manage the SATP in their offices. They oversee contract treatment services to ensure that contractors deliver the services required. They may supervise a caseload or may just monitor contracts. They serve as experts in confronting substance abuse and intervening to provide appropriate treatment and train and direct their fellow officers in substance abuse matters.

Identifying Substance Abuse

Officers identify substance abuse in various ways. Defendants or offenders may simply tell their officers that they have a substance abuse problem. Repeat offenders may have been identified previously as drug users. Or officers—who are trained to look for the physical and behavioral signs of substance abuse—may determine that a person has a problem.

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Officers may identify these persons through information in records and reports (including information from state and local law enforcement agencies), interviews with the individuals and their families, or drug testing.

Officers may detect substance abuse in observing defendants and offenders at work, at school, and in the community. For instance, during home visits, officers look for alcohol, drug contraband, and other evidence of substance abuse. Also, officers may use formal evaluations and testing methods to screen for substance abuse.

An important consideration in identifying substance abusers is whether they also suffer from mental health problems. These types of cases require officers to develop supervision plans that address both problems.

Success or Failure?

For persons required to undergo testing and treatment, how well they comply with the conditions set expressly for them determines whether they successfully complete supervision.

In the U.S. probation and pretrial services system, national policy sets minimum standards for the number of specimens and counseling sessions required monthly. If specimens are negative and counseling sessions go well, however, the number of urine collections and sessions required decreases over time. The treatment process, with its gradually decreasing requirements, takes about a year to complete.

If substance abuse continues despite treatment, revoking supervision may be in order. While officers should try any viable treatment approaches before initiating revocation, substance abusers must face the consequences of their actions. If they continue to submit positive specimens, fail to give specimens, give adulterated specimens, or otherwise fail to comply with court-ordered treatment, officers report such noncompliance to the court.

Testing

Urinalysis is an important component of substance abuse treatment. Surprise collection and testing of urine samples gives officers an effective means to detect drug use and determine whether persons under supervision have refrained from using drugs. Testing usually is unscheduled or random. The person being tested has less than 24 hours' notice that a specimen will be collected.

The Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts contracts with laboratories to test urine specimens for the presence of drugs or their metabolites. The laboratories routinely test for five major categories of drugs: opiates, cocaine, amphetamines, phencyclidine, and marijuana.

The laboratories also provide specimen collection supplies to probation and pretrial services offices, perform tests to confirm positive test results, and furnish expert testimony or affidavits for court proceedings.

In addition to the services provided by the contract laboratories, officers use other means to test for substance abuse. Some probation and pretrial services offices have on-site urine testing equipment. Some use hand-held drug testing kits. Some use the sweat patch, a band-aid-like device that tests perspiration for the presence of drugs. To test for alcohol, officers use breathalysers.

Treatment

Treatment is sometimes provided directly by officers. But most often, it comes either from community programs that provide services at no cost to the federal government or from treatment providers who are under contract to the United States courts.

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The Director of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, under 18 U.S.C. § 3672, has the authority to “contract with any appropriate public or private agency or person for the detection of and care in the community of an offender who is an alcohol-dependent person, an addict, or a drug-dependent person. . . .”

Treatment providers nationwide provide substance abuse services under contracts awarded through a competitive

process. The substance abuse specialist coordinates treatment services, matching the defendant or offender with appropriate treatment providers, monitoring the person's progress in and compliance with treatment, controlling treatment and testing funds, and overseeing the various treatment providers.

No single treatment approach will help every person. To be able to address defendants' and offenders' individual needs, officers require access to various types of treatment. For that reason, contractors provide a full range of services, including intake assessments; individual, group, family, and intensive outpatient counseling; physical examinations; detoxification; psychotherapy; and psychological/psychiatric work-ups. Contractors also may provide substance abuse prevention and relapse prevention programs and vocational testing, training, and placement.

