

## National Legal Aid & Defender Association

### Publications

Cornerstone

Directory of  
Legal Aid and  
Defender Offices

Indigent Defense ▶

Capital Report

List of Publications

How to Join



## A Banner Year For Drug Courts

### Question:

What's up with drug courts?

### Answer:

- 1) Funding
- 2) Thumbs
- 3) All of the above

If you answered "all of the above," you may already understand the benefits, or at least the inevitability, of defenders climbing on board the drug court train.

Federal funding to support the growth of state and local drug courts in 1999 is up 33 percent over previous years, from \$30 million to \$40 million. The funding curve has been steep, starting at \$12 million in 1995, \$15 million in 1996, and doubling to \$30 million for 1997 and 1998. Other federal agencies have chipped in more than \$20 million, and states have contributed another \$45 million. There are about 300 drug courts currently operating in the United States, and the Clinton administration is planning to triple that amount by the year 2000.

One key finding of the new studies as far as defenders are concerned is that drug courts significantly reduce reliance on incarceration. One new study, *Research on Drug Courts: A Critical Review*, prepared by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, found that as much as 43 percent of drug court clients would otherwise have been incarcerated. The White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy says drug court expansion can reduce the nation's prison population by a quarter of a million - from the current 1.5 million - within the next five years.

Of primary interest to legislators are the studies' findings that drug courts can simultaneously reduce both crime and criminal justice costs. Both the CASA review and a study released in November by the Physician Leadership on National Drug Policy find significantly and uniformly reduced recidivism rates both during and after drug court participation. And every dollar spent on drug courts can save some five dollars, according to the CASA review, not just in reduced costs of incarceration (including pretrial detention jail time), probation supervision, police overtime and other criminal justice system costs, but also in savings in reduced victimization, theft reduction, public assistance and medical claims. The Physician Leadership study found that drug courts save about ten times as much as they cost.

Some defenders play a very proactive role in the establishment of drug courts. In Los Angeles, California, where public defender Michael Judge led the campaign for a drug court (see "[Critical Issues for Defenders in the Design and Implementation of Drug Courts, in the November/December 1997 special issue of \*Indigent Defense\* focusing on drug courts](#)), the lead public defender in the drug court is becoming a national leader as well. Kathleen Cantella, who had a career as a registered nurse before law school, was recently honored by the Los Angeles Superior Court and the Countywide Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee, as the person most responsible for the significant recidivism-reduction success of the drug court (a 20 percent rearrest rate, versus 60 percent for jailed offenders). As profiled in a recent issue of the *National Law Journal* (November 17), she now teaches judges from other jurisdictions how to start drug courts of their own.

[Home](#) · [Welcome](#) · [Civil Legal Services](#) ·  
[Defender Legal Services](#) · [Government Relations](#) ·  
[Training and Conferences](#) · [In the News](#) · [Member Services](#) ·  
[NLADA Insurance Program](#)

© Copyright 1997, 1998, 1999 National Legal Aid & Defender Association