

Using Lessons from Recent Innovations to Create a Holistic Approach to Intervening with Juveniles

Testimony before the Council of the District of Columbia Committee on Human Services

John Roman

Abstract

Innovative practices – such as the Reclaiming Futures initiative, drug courts, and Project HOPE – can be used to better serve juveniles involved with the justice system and to improve public safety, the Urban Institute’s John Roman told a committee of the District of Columbia’s city council.

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Testimony

Good morning. My name is John Roman and I am a senior fellow in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where I have studied innovative crime and justice policies and programs for more than a decade. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about integrating innovative practices to better serve juveniles involved with the justice system and to improve public safety.

Using Lessons from Recent Innovations to Create a Holistic Approach to Intervening with Juveniles

Over the last decade, across the United States, there has been tremendous interest in reforming juvenile and criminal justice systems to both improve their performance and to improve public safety by reducing crime and delinquency among adjudicated youth. What I would like to describe today is how those innovative practices—the Reclaiming Futures initiative, drugs courts and other alternatives to commitment, and Project HOPE—might be integrated to maximize their effectiveness and minimize costs.

In the first phase of Reclaiming Futures, begun in 2002, multidisciplinary teams in ten communities worked collaboratively to enhance the availability and quality of substance abuse interventions for youth involved with the juvenile justice system. All ten projects relied on judicial leadership, court/community collaborations, interorganizational performance management, enhanced treatment quality, and multiagency partnerships to improve their systems of care for youthful offenders with substance abuse problems.

Reclaiming Futures was founded on the assumption that positive outcomes for youth are best achieved when service delivery systems are well managed and coordinated, and when they provide young people with comprehensive, evidence-based substance abuse treatments along with other interventions and supports. Reclaiming Futures was an effort to design and implement a model of organizational change and system reform that could improve the juvenile justice response to youth with drug and alcohol problems.

The second initiative which is showing evidence of success is Project HOPE. Project HOPE is a graduated sanctions program focused on swiftly and certainly detecting violations of supervision requirements. The HOPE model is straightforward: individuals under supervision are closely monitored and any infraction receives an immediate response. In effect, HOPE allows large numbers of individuals to be supervised with little cost.

The third initiative is better known: drug treatment courts. Drug courts combine graduated sanctions with treatment under the close supervision of a judge and successful participants graduate and have their charges dismissed or reduced.

These three initiatives have some shared characteristics that are notable:

- Systems reform is at the core of each, with a focus on changing the way the system approaches an individual. In effect, they make individuals, rather than agencies, their focus, and in drug courts and Reclaiming Futures, they change the system so that all services are brought to a youth. In the more traditional model, youth travel to different agencies with differing responsibilities for that youth.
- When these initiatives are successful, they focus exclusively on their core mission. Effective drug courts focus only on drug desistance and relapse prevention. Effective Reclaiming Futures initiatives focus exclusively on identifying the needs of youth and providing efficient triage so that only the minimal necessary intervention is administered. Project HOPE focuses exclusively on detecting infractions.

Integration of these three ideas would have important advantages for the District. In practice, youth would

be funneled through a triage process. In the first stage of processing, youth would be supervised in a HOPE-like environment, where the threat of punishment, coupled with a high likelihood that infractions are detected and sanctions are received, would cause many youth to self-select into compliance, thus preserving scarce treatment and commitment resources for youth who cannot.

In the second stage of processing, youth proceed through a Reclaiming Futures-like process, where youth undergo a bio-psychosocial diagnostic assessment to determine if there are underlying problems, such as alcohol or drug disorders, that are contributing to their lack of compliance. If youth fail less intense interventions, the response becomes progressively more intense, culminating with commitment. Commitment is thus reserved only for those youth who are not responsive to less intense interventions.

This approach is not in conflict with the philosophies that have guided youth-serving justice agencies in the District, but it would require a more integrated system, with more data sharing, more clear lines of communication, and, ultimately, more of a youth than an agency focus.

John Roman is a senior fellow in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where his research focuses on evaluations of innovative crime control policies and justice programs. Dr. Roman has directed studies on juvenile justice, drug courts, prisoner reentry, capital punishment, systems reform, police investigations, forensics, and wrongful conviction. He directed the evaluation and cost-benefit analysis of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Reclaiming Futures initiative. Dr. Roman is a lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania and an affiliated professor at Georgetown University.

References

Butts, Jeffrey B., and John K. Roman. 2007. "Changing Systems: Outcomes from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Reclaiming Futures Initiative on Juvenile Justice and Substance Abuse." Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

Other Publications by the Authors

- [John Roman](#)

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