

News Release



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Structure During a Time of Stress: Virtual Drug Court Hearings in New Jersey Provide Encouragement and Accountability During Pandemic

One drug court participant checked in from his parked car. Another signed in from his office. Another checked in while waiting for an oil change.

In all, 24 of the 25 drug court participants scheduled to appear before a Superior Court judge for Tuesday's noontime recovery court session in the Atlantic/Cape May Vicinage showed up for their required visit, just not in person. This was a virtual session. Drug court participants throughout New Jersey are now appearing by videoconference as the Judiciary reshapes the way it helps guide individuals through recovery during the COVID-19 health crisis.

"We are rightly focused on a pandemic that has changed our lives, but it is important to remember at the same time that the opioid crisis continues," said Chief Justice Stuart Rabner. "Individuals who deal with addiction issues are particularly vulnerable to relapsing in stressful times like these, when routines have been disrupted and many find themselves out of work. Virtual drug court provides continued structure and accountability at a time when it is needed most."

New Jersey's drug court program, which has more than 6,600 participants and graduated more than 26,000 participants since 2002, has proven effective in helping participants reclaim their lives. Within three years of graduation, 2.3 percent of drug court graduates are sentenced to state prison for new offenses compared to 40 percent of those released from prison in that same period.

In the Atlantic/Cape May Vicinage, the 45-minute virtual gatherings started on April 7. They will be held on Tuesdays until it is safe for in-person court matters to resume. Current sessions are focused on those in the earlier phases of the program who are considered to be at the greatest risk for relapse.

Superior Court Judge Mark Sandson, who presides over the vicinage's recovery court, made a special point of asking how well the participants are coping during this unprecedented public health crisis.

"You're making tremendous progress," Sandson told the group. "I want you to do well. I want you to stay connected to your probation officers. I want you to stay connected to your recovery support system."

Sandson knows drug court participants are particularly vulnerable right now. Attending substance abuse meetings is difficult. Some don't have access to a computer or have trouble using one. The lone woman who missed Tuesday's session doesn't have a phone.






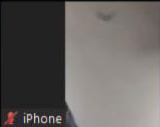
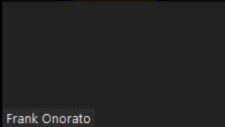
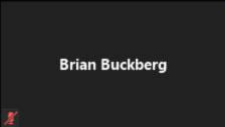








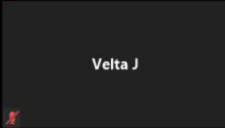




Sandson asked each participant to either describe a positive personal attribute, name a person who influenced them greatly, or recall the best advice they've been given.

One by one they responded, some opening up more than others.

"Through all the chaos, I can remain optimistic through it all," one woman said. "It's not going to last forever."

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Zoom Recording

 john.bond	 mark.sandson	 Aseem	 krista.trullender	
 bri.munoz	 iPhone	 Frank Onorato	 Brian Buckberg	 fpdmarq
 briana.munoz	 ATLVirCrtRm4....	 Melissa.Mcgee	 fpdbitt	 Katie Thomson
 Taheira Mitchell	 heyer_I	 Velta J	 Vicky Golas	 Theresa L
 Matt Waldman		 Tony		