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By Jacob Ashley

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Introduction:

Surprisingly few people know very much about the role of family drug courts. These courts are intimately involved with issues related to criminal justice, child welfare, drug abuse, mental health, and rehabilitation. The work of family drug courts has been shown to be highly effective in supporting drug rehabilitation and family reunification.

Question 1: What are family drug courts?

Family drug courts, or FDCs, are courts designed to tackle a specific issue within our criminal justice system: substance abuse in families. The goal of these courts is to reduce child abuse and neglect by addressing the substance abuse of the parents. This is a critically important goal, especially considering the recent opioid epidemic. Research shows that parental substance abuse is linked to educational and mental health problems in children, as well as child abuse and neglect, and the recent epidemic has led to a spike in family separation. FDCs identify and recruit eligible participants and help them achieve lasting sobriety and reunite with their children through a diverse, interdisciplinary approach to treatment.

Question 2: What challenges face family drug courts?

One of the biggest challenges facing family drug courts today is the extremely high rate of mental illness among substance abusers, and the even higher rate among those who abuse opioids. In fact, about 75% of heroin users fit the criteria for at least one mental illness. Co-occurring mental illness and substance abuse are linked to higher rates of child maltreatment and to negative child welfare outcomes. As well as this, untreated mental illness can lead to relapse. Drug court participants who also suffer from mental health problems are less likely to successfully complete their treatment programs and are more likely to drop out of drug courts entirely.

Question 3: What does the research indicate regarding the effectiveness of family drug courts?

Participation in family drug courts is linked to several positive outcomes for participants, families, and society. Substance abusing parents who participate in FDCs tend to enter treatment sooner, stay in treatment longer, and have higher rates of successful treatment completion than their counterparts who do not participate in FDCs. FDCs have also been shown to lead to more positive child welfare outcomes. Children of parents who participate in FDCs spend less time in the child welfare system and are more likely to be reunited with their parents. Finally, family drug courts are simply more cost effective than other child welfare models, and they save society money.

Question 4: How much of a problem is opioid abuse among Hardin County Family Recovery Court (HCFRC) participants?

Demographic trends in opioid abuse have changed. Today's typical opioid addict is white and often lives in a rural area, rather than a minority in an urban area. Ohio is at the center of the recent opioid epidemic, and this means that white, rural Hardin County has become a hotbed of opioid abuse. Significantly more than half (63%) of a recent sample of HCFRC (Hardin County Family Recovery Court) participants have abused opioids. Heroin is a particular problem, with almost half (49.7%) of the sample recorded as having abused heroin within the past year, and over a quarter (27.5%) within just the past 90 days.

Question 5: Are there any other concerning trends in drug abuse among these HCFRC participants?

Drug overdoses now kill more than two and a half times as many people as car accidents in Ohio, and the vast majority of these deaths involve opioids. This trend of increased opioid abuse is even more worrisome because of the widespread presence of fentanyl and its analogs, or chemical siblings. Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, is at least 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine, and roughly 90% of the unintentional drug overdose deaths looked at in a recent Ohio study involved fentanyl, its analogs, or both. Another concerning trend is the prevalence of crack cocaine. In the study of HCFRC participants, almost half (46%) had abused crack cocaine at some point in their lives, and almost 25% had used crack within the last year.

Conclusion:

Although few people are familiar with the role of family drug courts, these courts play an important function in fighting the opioid epidemic ravaging many in the Midwest. FDCs are essential in supporting families and helping parents struggling with addiction.