

# Specialty courts cut costs, improve lives

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Geno Salomone and Laura Mack, Free Press guest writers 12:06 a.m. EST December 3, 2015



(Photo: Detroit Free Press)

## Story Highlights

- Chief Judge Geno Salomone presides over a regional DWI/Sobriety court in Taylor.
- Chief Judge Laura Mack presides over a regional mental health court in Wayne.

Regionalism in government is a wonderful concept that is sometimes difficult to implement. Wayne County alone has 20 separate district courts and four municipal courts, each with its own judge or judges, funding source, court administrator and probation department. Many of these courts were created in times when government in general was expanding, not shrinking as it is now.

While these courts have borders, the reality is that the serious issues they confront, such as substance abuse and lack of treatment for mental illnesses, have no geographic borders. Defendants suffering with these problems make up most of criminal courts' dockets and often commit multiple crimes in multiple jurisdictions. When each court separately attempts to punish or rehabilitate the same defendant, the results are expensive, time consuming and, ultimately, unsuccessful. In fact, the criminal justice system is often seen as a "revolving door" where the same defendants are seen over and again.

Problem-solving courts that seek to address the underlying causes of crime, such as substance abuse and untreated mental illness, have been proved successful. For example, 98% of mental health court graduates improved their mental health. Participants in drug courts were two times less likely to reoffend; in sobriety and mental health courts, participants were three times less likely to reoffend.

The judge in a problem-solving court leads an interdisciplinary team of professionals, including a probation officer, prosecutor, treatment professional, defense attorney, case manager and representatives from law enforcement. The focus is on intense treatment and rehabilitation to break the "revolving door" cycle, not punishment.

But implementing a problem-solving court can be costly. Many communities lack resources for even routine functioning of their courts, let alone time- and personnel-intensive specialty courts.

So, to increase the availability of problem-solving courts to defendants throughout the state, the judicial and legislative leadership in Michigan created regional problem-solving courts. Regionalized courts include two or more counties, or two or more jurisdictional units within a large county such as Wayne County, to provide treatment services under strict court supervision. Michigan was the first state court system in the nation to establish regional DWI/Sobriety courts and the second to establish regional mental health courts.

Under a Michigan regional court team's strict supervision, an offender from one of the participating jurisdictions receives extensive treatment, coupled with conditions such as frequent drug testing, biweekly hearings with the judge, community service and other services designed to fit each individual's needs. The offender need not have committed the offense where the regional court is located. Resources are concentrated in one location and not duplicated and scattered within a geographic area.

The tremendous success of problem-solving courts results in not only safer communities but millions of dollars in savings. One study of such programs found that for every one dollar invested in a drug treatment court, there was an average cost savings, per defendant, of \$2,615 to \$12,218. There have been thousands of such participants in Michigan.

The impact of these regional courts can be felt on a daily basis in our communities. Only with a regional court is a drunken driver convicted in Allen Park, with a history of alcohol abuse, able to receive treatment in the Downriver Regional DWI court, located in Taylor. And a mentally ill person that commits larceny in Livonia can be treated at the Western Wayne County Regional Behavioral Treatment Court in the city of Wayne. Other Michigan regional courts cover not only multiple cities, but also multiple counties, especially in northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula.

These courts save lives, too. Consider the case of a defendant who came to the Downriver regional DWI court in 2014. It was her fourth alcohol related arrest. The defendant lost her job, was living with two of her three children at a friend's house, and was suffering from anxiety attacks. Through sobriety court, she received regular treatment and frequent hearings to monitor her progress. She now has more than 16 months clean time, is employed at one job and is actively seeking a second part-time position. She now has her own home, where she lives with all three of her children.

Our regional mental health court in Wayne currently has 22 participants. Eight committed crimes in neighboring jurisdictions and would not have had the benefit of intensive mental health treatment, were it not for Michigan's commitment to regional problem-solving courts. One recent graduate, who committed an offense in Westland, credits the program with getting him on track with his treatment for severe bipolar disorder, allowing him to live independently and go back to college.

It is essential that we learn from our experiences in treatment courts to make sure that the right offenders are diverted to treatment, and costly prison time is limited only to violent offenders, and use that knowledge to expand the process of regionalizing these courts throughout the state. Regional courts, unburdened of small geographic boundaries, help change lives, save taxpayer dollars and help build safer communities.

*Geno Salomone is chief judge of the 23rd District Court and presides over a regional DWI/Sobriety court in Taylor. Laura Mack is chief judge of the 29th District Court and presides over a regional mental health court in Wayne.*