

Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program Federal grant launches innovative Massachusetts Trial Court program for court users and loved ones impacted by substance use

The purpose of the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) grant program, awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), is to help states, units of local government, and Indian tribal governments develop, implement, or expand comprehensive efforts to identify, respond to, treat, and support those impacted by illicit opioids, stimulants, and other drugs.¹

In 2020, the Massachusetts Trial Court received a three-year \$6 million COSSUP grant to launch Project NORTH (Navigation, Outreach, Recovery, Treatment, and Hope), an innovative program providing access to recovery support navigation, transportation, and certified² sober housing for court-involved individuals and families impacted by substance use.

Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program helps communities respond to the overdose crisis

Developed as part of the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016, COSSUP’s purpose is to provide financial and technical assistance to states, local governments, and Indian tribal governments to develop, implement, or expand comprehensive efforts to identify, respond to, treat, and support those impacted by illicit opioids, stimulants, and other drugs. The defining feature of BJA’s COSSUP initiative is its emphasis on partnership and collaboration across the public health, behavioral health, and public safety sectors, and leveraging the combined expertise of each of these disciplines to develop unified and coordinated strategies.

Site-based grants are released annually and designed to be flexible, allowing each community to address its unique needs and respond to emerging needs that may be local or regional in nature. Courts are specifically named as eligible applicants but rarely apply. The Massachusetts Trial Court’s successful application demonstrates the potential to provide this court-based assistance by tapping into these funds.

“When a judge tells someone that they need to address their substance use problems it can be overwhelming to figure out how, even just where to begin. But if there’s someone they can talk to — at that moment — who is there to help direct them, we overcome one of the biggest barriers. We used to have to wait until people had long substance use or criminal histories before we could offer help. Now we’re intervening at the earliest level.”

– Judy Bazinet, Program Manager



Massachusetts Trial Court Secures COSSUP Funds to Improve Access to Evaluation, Treatment, and Services

Recognizing the role courts must play in the state’s response to the overdose epidemic, the Massachusetts Trial Court opted to pursue COSSUP funds to help address the societal problem that also impacts the criminal and civil justice system on a daily basis. While drug courts will continue to play a central role in combatting the overdose crisis, court leadership understood it was time for new approaches to get people immediate help.

In 2020, the Court teamed up with executive branch partners, the Massachusetts Probation Service, and the Executive Office of the Trial Court's grants team³ to develop Project NORTH and prepare the COSSUP application.⁴ Their shared goal was to make it easier for Massachusetts court users to access substance use treatment, recovery support, overdose prevention, and community services. The three-year \$6 million Project NORTH grant launched an innovative program to help people get "an ultra-warm handoff": easily accessible court-based Recovery Support Navigators who can connect court users and their family members with the services they need, when they need them.




"Courts are one of the community's hot spots for identifying people needing help with evaluation, navigation, and treatment. But our mapping research showed that access to the myriad services is daunting. Our goal is to weave a tighter fabric between when we identify that people have behavioral health needs and when they are connected to community-based care that meets them where they are."

– Marisa Hebble, Project NORTH Director

The Trial Court was able to lead this collaborative effort because they already have a track record of working alongside legal, treatment, recovery, crisis, healthcare, and social service partners through their Sequential Intercept Mapping project, in which they conducted cross-systems mapping and action planning workshops and engaged community stakeholders in developing lasting solutions.⁵ The Trial Court started building this foundation when they hired public health professional Marisa Hebble in 2016 to research where people with substance use disorder (SUD) fall through the cracks in services and to identify earlier intervention points that may reduce justice-system involvement or prevent it altogether.

What it funds

The bulk of the \$6 million grant covers direct services for participants and non-court staff:

-  Transportation to treatment, recovery support, or other services
-  Rent for up to 90 days at a certified sober home
-  Salaries for the Recovery Support Navigators who are employed by local behavioral health treatment agencies or community health centers (not the court)

The Massachusetts Trial Court retains \$800,000 to serve as the program's hub to ensure coordination of Recovery Support Navigators and services, evaluation, and overall grant management.

How it works

Project NORTH is free, confidential, and voluntary – participants are free to accept or decline the no-cost services. Court users who choose to participate work with Recovery Support Navigators to enroll in treatment or make connections to other community-based services and recovery supports.

Referrals to Project NORTH Recovery Support Navigators come from probation officers, judges, attorneys, court clinicians, family members, and court-involved individuals themselves. Referrals can be made to any court user impacted by substance use, especially where risk factors for overdose, transportation barriers to engaging in treatment, and/or housing instability are present.

To be eligible for Project NORTH services, participants must have a case in a Project NORTH location and either: a current open case in any court department, an open case in the last year, or be currently under probation supervision or supervised in the past year.

Navigators follow up with clients 24 hours, 7 days, and 30 days after intake. Navigators assist with:

- ▶ Identifying and facilitating access to evaluation, treatment, recovery support, family support, and overdose prevention resources available in the community
- ▶ Assisting with health insurance enrollment and adjustment
- ▶ Accessing treatment and support services, including prescribers for addiction and psychiatric medications
- ▶ Developing personal goals and objectives related to substance use, treatment, and recovery
- ▶ Providing both short-term care management and connections to long-term and comprehensive care coordination services
- ▶ Serving as an on-site resource for court staff, partners, and court users
- ▶ Communicating with court personnel only when the participant affirmatively seeks such communication and has signed a release form



Who it serves

Project NORTH has 13 Navigators and participating sites that serve people with criminal justice system involvement and those with civil justice system involvement. This includes child welfare matters, evictions related to substance use disorder, and civil commitments for substance use treatment for people who do not meet the standard for commitment but still need engagement and treatment services. This enables people to access care before reaching a state of crisis, intervening at a stage that can reduce instability and harm to themselves and their families.

Extensive research enabled the Project NORTH team to select communities disproportionately impacted by opioid, stimulant, and other substance use disorders. Overall, Project NORTH locations have higher poverty rates and are more Black, more Latino, and less White compared to statewide demographics. All Project NORTH communities reported challenges accessing court-based evaluation, navigation and treatment, care coordination, housing, and transportation.

“Court-based Recovery Support Navigation has been a useful resource for court users and their families to have on-demand access to help navigating the treatment and recovery network in the community.” – *Hon. John Julian, First Justice, Barnstable District Court*

Additional nuts and bolts

- ▶ A partnership with the UMass Chan Medical School Center of Excellence for Specialty Courts enabled development of an electronic database to assist with data analysis and to plan for and conduct the evaluation.
- ▶ A cross-sector Advisory Board includes representatives from Trial Court leadership, Judges, Probation, Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Department of Public Health Bureau of Substance Addiction Services, Department of Mental Health, MassHealth, Massachusetts Alliance for Sober Housing, Committee for Public Counsel Services, Community Justice Support Centers, and UMass Chan Medical School Center of Excellence for Specialty Courts.
- ▶ Contracting agencies that host Recovery Support Navigators manage all aspects of hiring and employment, consistent with qualifications outlined in each agency’s contract. The Project NORTH Program Manager participates in interviews whenever possible and meets with all Recovery Support Navigators individually at least one time per week, as a group weekly, and whenever triage and troubleshooting is needed. The Program Manager and contracting agencies work collaboratively to onboard and train new Navigators.
- ▶ Navigators are bound by medical confidentiality laws.

Early data details program's promise

A year and 10 months after hiring the first of 13 Recovery Support Navigators, Project NORTH has conducted intakes with 1,329 clients and made over 1,300 referrals to services. After intake, Navigators successfully connected with clients 80% of the time to follow-up on outcomes of the referrals and discuss additional needs. Among clients who were referred to services and who Navigators successfully connected with after intake, 90% of clients were able to connect with care.

Lessons learned so far

1. **Communication is both critical and challenging.** Developing and implementing court-based projects means understanding that courts have multiple departments and multiple hierarchies within departments. Co-locating an external treatment service in an already complex environment requires significant investment in communication practices. Working within multiple hierarchies, departments, and locations requires ritual communications and meetings between Project NORTH staff, Trial Court leadership and staff, Navigators, and their supervisors.
2. **Use multiple modes of communication and multiple languages.** Communication with justice-involved people and the general public must include print materials in multiple languages and a public-facing website, as well as an internal website for court staff.
3. **Figure out courthouse logistics.** Securing office space inside the courthouse is the gold standard because it allows court users to easily access help. In some cases, Recovery Support Navigators will find an unused room in the same building to conduct intakes if private office space is not available. Regardless, it's essential that Recovery Support Navigators have access to a quiet meeting place, any necessary equipment, and a badge that helps them easily get in and out of the courthouse.
4. **Find champions at all levels.** Project NORTH has many moving parts. Champions are needed at all stages of program development and implementation to help braid together the too-often siloed lanes. It pays to invest time in finding and engaging those key players.⁶
5. **Community connections are key.** Connecting people to services and helping to keep people with behavioral health needs out of hospital emergency rooms requires building bridges and trust between courts and communities. Project NORTH connections are strong because of the partner organizations and Recovery Support Navigators. Funding the court-based Recovery Support Navigators also helps under resourced organizations by bringing new funds and jobs into the community. Cultivating strong relationships among Recovery Support Navigators and with community-based providers—both locally and statewide—can help address resource shortages in the community, especially in more rural areas.
6. **Build data collection, evaluation, and sustainability planning into the program from the start.** In partnership with the UMass Chan Medical School Center of Excellence for Specialty Courts, Project NORTH has been able to develop a systematic approach to evaluate outcomes and collect data about client demographics, court involvement, substance use, and treatment needs among the target population. Qualitative and quantitative data enables Project NORTH staff to continuously make program improvements, provide information for sustainability planning, and guide future funding prospects.

Endnotes

1. For more information about COSSUP, see Bureau Of Justice Assistance's Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, And Substance Use Program Resource Center, at <https://www.cossup.org>.
2. Certification is performed by the Massachusetts Alliance for Sober Housing, a statewide agency that oversees a voluntary certification process for sober homes. Project NORTH sober housing resources can only be used at licensed and participating MASH-certified sober homes.
3. To learn more about the grant team led by Jessica Fix, see National Center for State Courts Tiny Case Studies, (Sept. 6, 2022), *Dedicated grant management staff help courts obtain funding, ensure compliance, and expand court services*, at https://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/82680/Grant-management-final.pdf

4. Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Site-based Program (COSSUP) FY 2020 Competitive Grant Solicitation (May 29, 2020), at <https://bja.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh186/files/media/document/bja-2020-17023.pdf>

5. SAMHSA's GAINS Center, (2013), *Developing a Comprehensive Plan for Behavioral health & Criminal Justice Collaboration: The Sequential Intercept Model*, Delmar, NY: Policy Research Associates, Inc. See also, Massachusetts Executive Office of the Trial Court, (n.d.), *Learn About the Massachusetts Community Justice Project*, at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/learn-about-the-massachusetts-community-justice-project>

6. See e.g., *About Project NORTH*, (n.d.), at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/about-project-north#sober-housing-> and *Project NORTH Materials*, (n.d.), at <https://www.mass.gov/lists/project-north-materials>.