



10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DARTMOUTH WELLNESS COURT

Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2019 (Halifax, NS) – The most recent evaluation of Nova Scotia’s longest running Wellness Court Program highlights how this collaborative, problem-solving approach is helping individuals address their mental health and serious substance use issues and is inspiring similar programs across the province.

Members of the Dartmouth Wellness Court team, representatives from Nova Scotia’s Wellness Court Programs Steering Committee, and graduates of the Dartmouth program gathered at the courthouse today, Nov. 5, to mark the 10th anniversary and the release of the preliminary findings of the evaluation.

“The problem-solving approach taken in Wellness Court Programs ensures the focus is on the individual’s recovery, while also addressing the root causes of their offending behaviour,” said The Hon. Pamela Williams, Chief Judge of the Provincial and Family Courts of Nova Scotia and the presiding Judge in the Dartmouth Wellness Court. “Our attitudes and programs around the province continue to evolve to provide this type of holistic response for this segment of the population, who finds themselves before our criminal courts.”

The original program started on Nov. 5, 2009, as the Nova Scotia Mental Health Court Program in Dartmouth. Since its inception, has been a collaboration with the Mental Health and Addictions Program, first with Capital Health and now Nova Scotia Health Authority, which has administered and provided oversight of the clinical support of participants in the program.

Now known as the Dartmouth Wellness Court, it includes the Mental Health Court Program, the Opioid Court Program, the Alcohol Court Program, and the Judicial Monitoring Program. The court’s new name better reflects the geographic region it serves (the Halifax Regional Municipality) and helps destigmatize mental health and substance use issues for the program participants, by putting the focus on wellness.

“From the moment I became a participant in the program, I felt the court team truly supported my success and positive reintegration back into the community,” said Tomi Abriel, who completed the Mental Health Court Program in 2017. “It wasn’t easy though. When you’re accepted into the program, you make a commitment to work hard and complete all the requirements of your support plan. There were days when I didn’t know if I could make it through, but I did, and it was worth it — the program changed my life.”

In honour of the 10th anniversary, and in keeping with the program's commitment to evaluate and improve the services available, the court team collaborated with the Dalhousie Faculty of Health's School of Occupational Therapy to do an independent evaluation and report on progress and next steps for the program. The research team agreed it was also a good opportunity to evaluate the related programs in Dartmouth and the programs that have set up since in Amherst, Kentville and Port Hawkesbury.

Although they did not form part of this evaluation, Nova Scotia also has Wellness Court Programs operating in Wagmatcook First Nation, and the province has created specialty problem-solving courts in Sydney and Halifax to address the needs of people affected by domestic violence. The province is also in the process of establishing Wellness Court Programs in Truro and Bridgewater.

"Nova Scotia's Wellness Court Programs give people an alternative path through our justice system – one that provides access to the services and supports that help them build a brighter future," said Mark Furey, Attorney General and Minister of Justice. "I am so proud of the work we've done together over these last 10 years, and the positive impact it has had on the lives of so many Nova Scotians."

This first phase of the evaluation focused primarily on qualitative data. The research team spent the last 12 months conducting interviews and focus groups with team members and court program participants, as well as doing a thorough document review of the program files in each location.

Information about key indicators of success and outcomes deemed meaningful by court participants will inform the second phase of the evaluation. In the coming months, the research team will review quantitative data collected from the Department of Justice and the Nova Scotia Health Authority, for Dartmouth Wellness Court graduates only.

"We know that no one model can be applied universally for all Wellness Court Programs," said Dr. Crystal Dieleman, an Assistant Professor at the School of Occupational Therapy who is responsible for the overall development and management of the evaluation project. "As such, it was never our intent to compare the programs in this study to one another. Each is designed based on the needs of the community it serves, as well as availability of, and access to resources. Accordingly, each program will have different strengths and limitations, which are outlined in our preliminary findings."

The data collected did show some commonalities between the programs involved in this evaluation, including:

- Participation in the Wellness Court Program is voluntary;
- Referrals to the program come from a variety of sources;

- All potential participants must undergo a screening assessment, although the specifics of the assessment differ for each program;
- A strong connection between the index offence and a mental health or substance use issue (a nexus) is required to meet the eligibility requirements;
- Individualized support plans are developed in partnership with the participant and the court team;
- The participant must complete their support plan to the satisfaction of the court team to be eligible to graduate from the program;
- Sanctions (e.g. house arrest, curfew, written or verbal warnings or jail time) can be applied for certain behaviours (e.g. additional criminal charges, failed drug tests, missed appointments or breach of conditions);
- Rewards, such as fewer court check-ins and being called at the beginning of the docket, are preferred to positively reinforce behaviours that contributed to a participant's progress through the program; and
- All supports and services are provided according to a Brokerage Model of service delivery (essentially, while eligibility assessments and ongoing monitoring are done by the Court, it is not responsible for direct service provision). This Brokerage Model of service delivery is one reason why the structure and function of individual court programs varied, depending on geographical location.

The evaluation report, *Nova Scotia's Wellness Courts: Progressing Justice*, is available online at www.courts.ns.ca. Data analysis is ongoing and further findings will be released in the coming months.

-30-

Media Contacts:

Jennifer Stairs
Director of Communications,
Nova Scotia Judiciary
902-221-5257 (C)
stairsjl@courts.ns.ca

Maureen Wheller
Senior Communications Advisor
Mental Health & Addictions Program,
Nova Scotia Health Authority
902-221-7008 (C)
Maureen.Wheller@nshealth.ca

Sarah Levy MacLeod
Media Relations Advisor, Nova Scotia
Department of Justice
902-478-3229 (C)
Sarah.Levy@novascotia.ca

Terry Murray-Arnold
School Communications Specialist
Dalhousie Faculty of Health
902-495-0015 (C)
tmurray@dal.ca