

# Vermont Drug Courts: Rutland County Adult Drug Court Process, Outcome, and Cost Evaluation *Executive Summary*



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# Vermont Drug Courts: Rutland County Adult Drug Court Process, Outcome, and Cost Evaluation

## *Executive Summary*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the past 20 years, one of the strongest movements in the United States focused on reducing substance abuse among the criminal justice population has been the spread of Drug Courts across the country. Drug courts are designed to guide offenders identified as drug-addicted into treatment that will reduce drug dependence and improve the quality of life for offenders and their families. Drug court programs are a collaborative process between multiple agencies including the Court, District or State's Attorneys, Public Defenders, Probation, the Sheriff and treatment agencies. Benefits to society take the form of reductions in crime committed by drug court participants, resulting in reduced costs to taxpayers and increased public safety.

In 2002, under Act 128 the Vermont legislature established a pilot project to create drug court initiatives and begin implementing drug courts in 3 Vermont counties: Rutland, Chittenden, and Bennington. By 2007, at the sunset of Act 128, drug courts in Vermont were up and running on their own. Currently, in Vermont, there are three operational Adult Drug Courts, one Family Treatment Court and one Mental Health Court.

The Rutland County Adult Drug Court (RCADC) began its operations in January 2004 with the support of a federal grant. In early 2008, NPC Research, under contract with the Supreme Court of Vermont, Office of the Court Administrator, began a process, outcome and cost study of the Rutland County Adult Drug Court program (RCADC). The goals of this project were to evaluate the effectiveness of the RCADC in reducing recidivism, to determine the cost-benefits of drug court participation and to evaluate the RCADC processes. The results of this evaluation are designed to be helpful in assisting the drug court in improving the services to drug court participants, and in gaining support from the community.

The evaluation was designed to answer key policy questions that are of interest to program practitioners, policymakers and researchers including:

1. Has the RCADC program been implemented as intended and are they delivering planned services to the target population?
2. Does the RCADC reduce recidivism?
3. Is there a cost-savings to the taxpayer due to drug court participation?

### Methods

**Process Evaluation.** A process evaluation considers a program's policies and procedures and examines whether the program is meeting its goals and objectives. Process evaluations generally determine whether programs have been implemented as intended and are delivering planned services to target populations. For this evaluation, the RCADC process was examined to determine whether, and how well, the program was manifesting the 10 Key Components of drug courts. Program practices were compared to national data on common drug court practices as well as data from recent studies on practices related to positive participant outcomes such as graduation, reduced recidivism and cost savings. The information that supports the process description was collected from staff interviews, drug court participant focus groups, observations of the RCADC, and program documents such as the RCADC's Participant Handbook.

**Outcome Evaluation.** The outcome analyses were based on a cohort of RCADC participants who entered the drug court program from January 1, 2004, through July 31, 2007, and a comparison

group of offenders eligible for drug court but who received traditional court processing. Participants and comparison group members were tracked through administrative criminal justice and treatment databases for up to 36 months post drug court entry. The two groups were matched on age, gender, ethnicity, prior criminal history and indications of drug use. Outcomes analyzed included criminal justice recidivism over three years post program entry, reductions in drug use, graduation rate and participant characteristics that led to successful program completion.

**Cost Evaluation.** A *cost-benefit* evaluation calculates the cost of the program and also the cost of the outcomes, resulting in a cost-benefit ratio. For example, the cost of the program is compared to the cost-savings due to the reduction in re-arrests. In some drug court programs, for every dollar spent on the program, over \$10 is saved due to positive outcomes.<sup>1</sup> This evaluation is a *cost-benefit* analysis. The cost approach utilized by NPC Research is called Transactional and Institutional Cost Analysis (TICA). The TICA approach views an individual's interaction with publicly funded agencies as a set of *transactions* in which the individual utilizes resources contributed from multiple agencies. Transactions are those points within a system where resources are consumed and/or change hands. In addition, the TICA approach recognizes that these transactions take place within multiple organizations and institutions that work together to create the program of interest. Finally, in order to maximize the study's benefit to policymakers, a "cost-to-taxpayer" approach was used for this evaluation.

## Results

### ***Question #1: Has the RCADC been implemented as intended and are they delivering planned services to the target population?***

**YES.** Using the 10 Key Components of Drug Courts (NADCP, 1997) as a framework, NPC Research examined the practices of the RCADC program. Overall, the Rutland Drug Court is doing an exemplary job of demonstrating the 10 Key Components. We found that the RCADC:

- Integrates alcohol and other drug treatment services effectively with justice system case processing,
- Does an excellent job of using a non-adversarial approach between prosecution and defense counsel,
- Provides a very good continuum of treatment services,
- Uses frequent alcohol/drug testing to monitor abstinence,
- Has a reward and sanction structure for responding to participant compliance,
- Has had regular evaluations and used the feedback in determining policies and procedures,
- Has a judge that is well respected and liked by the team and participants,
- Has provided national and local training in the drug court model to all team members, and
- Excels at developing partnerships with public and private community agencies and organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> See drug court cost-benefit studies at [www.npresearch.com](http://www.npresearch.com)

The areas in which the RCADC may wish to implement changes to enhance their services are as follows:

- Longer terms for the drug court judge,
- More explicit explanations of the reason and purpose for specific sanctions for the benefit of both the participant receiving the sanction and the participants observing in court,
- Full observation of all UAs for both genders,
- Increasing the frequency of drug tests (such as using less expensive tests), and
- Finding ways to provide practical support for participants to enhance their ability to comply with program requirements and increase graduation rates.

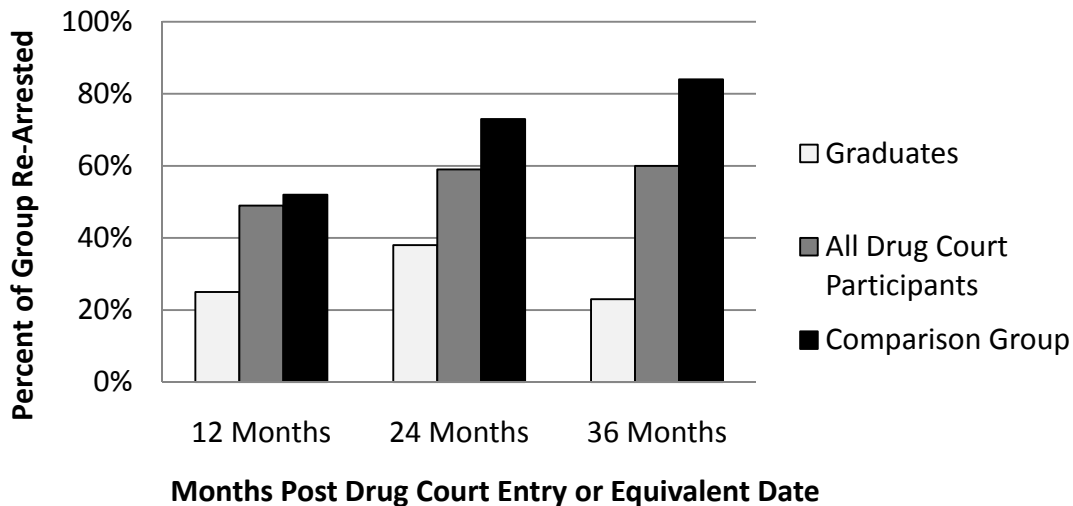
A detailed list of all recommendations resulting from the process, outcome and cost evaluations is provided in the recommendations section at the end of the main report.

**Question #2: Does the RCADC reduce recidivism?**

**YES.** The results of the outcome analysis for the Rutland County Adult Drug Court were positive. Recidivism rates, the percent of individuals who were re-arrested, were significantly lower for drug court participants.

After 3 years, 23% of the graduates and 61% of all drug court participants were re-arrested following entrance into the drug court program, while 84% of comparison group members were re-arrested (see Figure A). This difference was significant at 36 months ( $p < .01$ ) and significant at the level of a “trend” at 24 months ( $p < .10$ ).<sup>2</sup>

**Figure A. Percent of Graduates, All Drug Court Participants, and Comparison Group Re-Arrested Over 36 Months**



<sup>2</sup> Note: N sizes by group and time period are as follows: 12 Months: Graduates n = 32, All Drug Court Participants n = 79, Comparison Group n = 101; 24 Months: Graduates n = 24, All Drug Court Participants n = 63, Comparison Group n = 89; 36 Months: Graduates n = 13, All Drug Court Participants n = 45, Comparison Group n = 69.

In addition, compared to offenders who experienced traditional court processes, the RCADC participants (regardless of whether they graduated from the program):

- Had 3 times fewer drug charges in the 3 years after drug court entry,
- Had 3 times fewer violent charges in the 3 years after drug court entry,
- Had nearly half as many re-arrests 3 years from program entry and
- Had significantly reduced drug use over time in the program.

Further analyses showed that the drug court is keeping participants in the program during the intended 8-month length of the program but that graduates were significantly more likely to spend longer (just over a year) in the program. In addition, participants who spent less time in the program were more likely to be re-arrested. This suggests that participants benefit from longer time in the program.

The graduation rate for the RCADC program is 36%, which is 15% below the national average. This graduation rate, along with the data on length of stay described above, suggests that the RCADC team should spend some time working toward ways to assist participants in addressing challenges to following program requirements so that a greater number can stay in the program longer and successfully complete the program.

Overall, the drug court program has been successful in its main goals of reducing drug use and recidivism among its participants and increasing public safety.

***Question #3: Is there a cost-savings to the taxpayer due to RCADC drug court participation?***

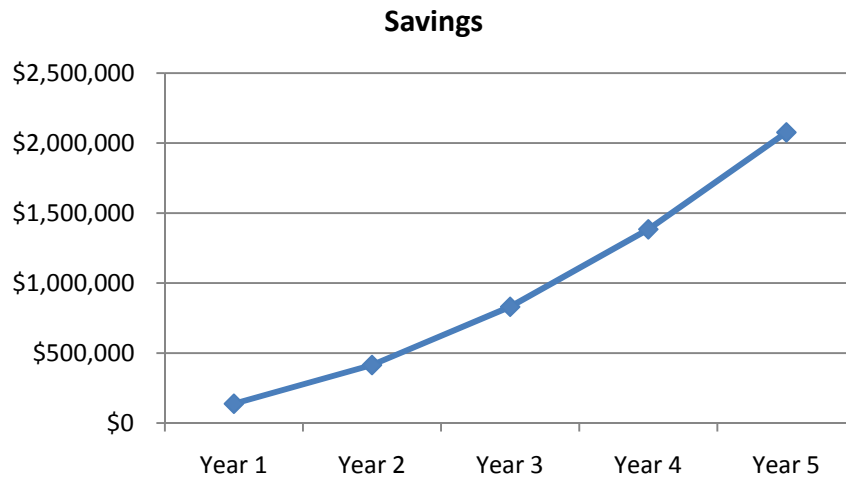
**YES.** The Rutland County Adult Drug Court results in significant cost savings and a return on the cost invested in the program.

The program investment cost was \$19,405 per drug court participant. The cost due to recidivism (re-arrests, new court cases, probation, incarceration and victimizations) over three years from program entry was \$48,277 per drug court participant compared to \$64,251 per comparison individual resulting in a savings of \$15,977 per participant (regardless of whether they graduate). If these participants continue to experience lower recidivism over time as has been demonstrated in other research (e.g., Finigan, Carey, & Cox, 2008) these savings can be expected to continue to accrue. After 10 years the savings per participant accumulate to over \$53,000 per participant, a return of \$3 for every dollar invested in the program.

Further, the total RCADC *criminal justice system cost* per participant during the program is \$5,809 less than traditional court processing (\$9,749 if victimizations are included), so there is a clear benefit to the taxpayer in terms of criminal justice related costs in choosing the drug court process over traditional court processing.

As the existence of the RCADC continues, the savings generated by drug court participants due to decreased substance use and decreased criminal activity can be expected to continue to accrue, repaying investment in the program and beyond. The savings will also continue to grow with the number of participants that enter each year. If the RCADC program continues to enroll a cohort of **26** new participants annually, the savings per participant over 3 years results in an annual savings of **\$138,441** per cohort (including victimizations), which can then be multiplied by the number of years the program remains in operation and for additional cohorts per year. This accumulation of savings is demonstrated in Figure B. After 5 years, the accumulated savings come to over \$2,000,000.

**Figure B. Projected Criminal Justice Cost Savings Over 5 Years**



In sum, the RCADC program had:

- A 3-year criminal justice system cost savings of **\$15,977** including victimization costs,
- Criminal justice system costs that were 59% less during program participation compared to non-drug court participants during a similar time period,
- A projected 150% return on its investment after 5 years (a 1:1.5 cost benefit ratio), and
- A projected 300% return on its investment after 10 years (a 1:3 cost benefit ratio).

Overall, these results demonstrate that the RCADC program is effective in reducing recidivism and reducing drug use while using fewer criminal justice system resources during program participation and producing substantial taxpayer cost savings. Taken together these findings indicate that the RCADC is both beneficial to participants and beneficial to Vermont taxpayers.