

Professionals Perceptions of the Saskatoon Mental Health (MHS) Court

Study Authors: Dr. Krista Mathias, Dr. Alexandra Zidenberg, Courtney Florchinger, Dr. Lisa Jewell, Dr. J. Stephen Wormith from the Centre for Behavioural Forensic Science and Justice Studies; and Glen Luther from the College of Law



The Saskatoon Mental Health Strategy aims to support individuals living with mental illness and cognitive impairments who encounter the criminal justice system. To inform the Saskatoon Mental Health Strategy, the Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science and Justice Studies conducted a process evaluation providing an assessment of the Court's activities and its effectiveness by examining the perspectives and opinions of professionals who have extensive knowledge and firsthand experience with the Mental Health Strategy Court (MHS Court) and its clients. First, a mail survey was completed by 45 professionals representing criminal justice, social, and mental health support services. The survey had a 48.9% response rate. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 participants who were most involved in the MHS Court and who worked in the fields of criminal justice, social support and mental health services. Many interviewees had previously completed the mail survey.

Research Questions

- Is the MHS Court functioning as intended and are the objectives being met?
- Is the MHS Court functioning effectively?
- Are the organizations involved in the MHS Court functioning effectively?
- What are professionals' perceptions of the functioning of the MHS Court and its contribution to their own professional growth?



Mail Survey Results

Respondents to the mail survey perceived that:

- Pre-court meetings led to an increased awareness of clients' needs and a better understanding of how to support clients.
- Pre-court meetings allowed for greater consultation with clients and other community services.
- The MHS Court empowered clients by allowing them to speak openly in court, and the treatment plans utilized by the Court supported the needs of clients.
- The MHS Court diverted clients from prison sentences and, compared to the traditional court system, was more effective in reducing recidivism among clients with mental illness, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and other cognitive impairments.



Semi-Structured Interview Results

Perceived Strengths of the Saskatoon MHS Court

- Participants were being treated for the underlying cause of their offending behaviour rather than simply being penalized.
- The Court brought awareness to different reasons as to why people commit crimes.
- Pre-court meetings allowed professionals to better understand how to support clients.

Perceived Challenges of the Saskatoon MHS Court

- Difficulties achieving a balance between providing services to as many people as possible while also providing each client with the depth of service and personal attention they required to be successful.
- Professionals discussed the delicate balance that exists to maintain the goals of the Court such as meeting the needs of the clients, taking clients' mental health concerns into consideration, and managing public safety.
- The lack of dedicated resources and funding caused strain on professionals involved in the Court by increasing their workloads without sufficient resources to offset this increase.

Recommendations and Conclusions

- Increase funding for the Court.
- Hire a coordinator to track each individual case.
- Increase the number of professionals involved with the Court to reduce the workload experienced by the professionals currently involved.

Overall, the MHS Court was functioning well with some minor refinements required and was perceived to be meeting the goal of diverting clients away from the traditional justice system and treating the underlying causes of criminality.

