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## **Information Technology Transfer in Drug Courts: Pilot Test of the eCourt System**

Drug courts have been praised for innovation and promising results but criticized for failing to employ the kind of information technology (IT) needed to manage clients and operations across the multiple agencies, and to yield the data needed to inform stakeholders. The eCourt IT system is being developed and pilot tested, and builds our basic knowledge on technology transfer in settings that bridge the health and justice systems.

eCourt developers took advantage of an existing software platform, the national Web Infrastructure for Treatment Services (WITS), to build the eCourt IT system. It has several key features:

- numerous screen modules designed to meet core functionality of drug courts (including assessment, treatment referral and tracking, court hearings and legal information, etc.);
- built-in, exportable reports on client progress and court-level performance across clients;
- mechanisms to encourage interagency collaboration and data sharing driven by consent.

Ten drug courts across the country are piloting the eCourt system. Five have completed the six-month pilot phase, and the findings reported here were compiled from structured interviews done with drug court team members before, during, and after the pilot, and from system-generated data that tracked eCourt “hits” – each time a user either entered data or accessed an eCourt screen:

- Implementation of the system varied widely across the five pilot sites. The Jackson County (Kansas City, MO) drug court, the largest of the sites, was also by far the biggest user of the system, with 187,222 total hits over the six-month pilot. Even when adjusting for court size, Jackson had nearly twice the number of hits recorded by the Ramsey County (St. Paul, MN) drug court, and roughly 10 to 15 times the number of hits for the Providence, RI drug court, and smaller drug courts in Will County (Joliet, IL) and Shawnee County (Topeka, KA).
- Across all sites, the most heavily used screens were those involving court hearings and court actions (sanctions, phase advancement) with 19,913 hits, case management (14,932 hits) and client profile and background screens (14,893 hits). With the exception of the Jackson site, there was almost no use of the treatment screens.
- Judges in the pilot sites gave very favorable rankings about the utility and value of eCourt but none of them ever logged in as a user of the system. Case managers and other court personnel (including prosecutors and defense attorneys) were the heaviest users of eCourt.

Given the small number of sites and their unique differences, no rigorous conclusions can be drawn, however several notable patterns emerged from the eCourt pilot data:

- Limited use of eCourt in some sites reflects the problems and limits faced by many current drug courts. Funding cuts, high staff turnover, a focus on enforcement, and limited involvement and intensity of treatment were evident in the eCourt results, particularly in the smaller courts.
- Organizational readiness, which may be facilitated by an experienced trainer, is needed for courts to take advantage of the system’s interagency collaboration and reporting capabilities.
- Courts must be of sufficient size to have specialized data entry staff, or have users who value eCourt reporting functions, to generate sustained use of a complex technology like eCourt.