

Didactic Fragments

The Scope of Process and Practical Work in Mental Health Court Program Phases

Stage-based models are designed to represent a temporal dimension in which individuals are viewed as evolving over time through advancing phases of cognitive, emotional and behavioral development. The stage paradigm is therefore consistent with the temporal dimension of criminal justice which naturally involves significant time spans relevant to the imposition of legal penalties and probationary systems that extend beyond the immediacy of the criminal act.

The value of the stage paradigm with respect to the mental health court is that it structures the work of therapeutic justice into a more manageable succession of progress toward clinical and judicial reconciliation that is better suited to the mentally ill offender. Behavior and lifestyle change is not measured as a fixed point in time. It is not necessarily a lineal continuum of progression, but is usually an evolving course of ascending steps to a defined goal.

Recognizing the stage aspects of human change, the First District Mental Health Court attempts to utilize a blend of stage-based models as a logical method to structure the fulfillment of therapeutic jurisprudence. As represented below, three models that utilize a stage paradigm, (Assimilation theory, Transtheoretical model, and Hero Motif) are brought together as a conceptual, organizational, and practical framework for addressing the issue of program advancement. These stage-based models and their characteristic feature of ascending or progressive paths toward fulfillment, together represent the “leitmotif” or recurring thematic concept and guiding conceptualization of the mental health court program.

Commensurate with the phase design of the program is the division of labor between the process work and the practical activity to which each participant engages as part of phase advancement. The process and practical dimensions of the program represent generalized and specialized program elements respectively, meaning that the process elements are applicable to every participant and only differ as to the scale of time in transition through each process, whereas the practical elements are customized and scaled to the functional level of each participant individually.

For example, all participants will transition through the processes of assimilation, self-change, and the heroic quest. Each process for each participant will unfold over time and involve the same process steps or stages without differentiation as to functional level or mental health condition. However, the practical activities of employment or productivity, continuing education, and mental health recovery will of necessity differ in requirement according to each participant’s particular condition and functional ability.

Understanding both process and practice for mental health court participants will serve to provide the appropriate context for program advancement as well as the measures of success and sustainability beyond the formality of frequent court appearances and judicial expectations. Reducing the risk of criminal recidivism and increasing the likelihood of mental health recovery are the anticipated outcomes of effective process and practice in specialty court programs.