



It's the 20th anniversary of the Drug Treatment Court of Vancouver!

Updated: 2024

On December 4, 2001, the Provincial Court of BC launched Canada's second drug treatment court. The Drug Treatment Court of Vancouver (DTCV) is a specialized court that uses a problem-solving approach to the criminal process for people who commit offences to support addiction to drugs such as cocaine, heroin, fentanyl or other opiates, and crystal methamphetamine.

DTCV uses an integrated, collaborative approach involving a dedicated judge, prosecutor and defence lawyer, Community Corrections manager and probation officers, addiction counsellors, an addiction doctor, nurse, clinical counsellors, a clinical supervisor, peer-support worker, Community Integrated Supervisor and administrative support. These integrated teams help offenders overcome substance abuse and reduce the harms caused by addiction. Adopting the principles of "therapeutic jurisprudence" achieves the goals of rehabilitating offenders and promoting safer communities by reducing criminal behaviour.

Participants are screened by prosecutors to determine their eligibility. If eligible, the participant enters the program by pleading guilty to the offence(s) charged. They will be under strict bail conditions including reporting to court regularly, random urine testing, and taking part in a 14-month intensive day treatment program located outside Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.



In its two decades of operation, the DTCV has had over 300 successful graduates. At first glance that may not seem like a lot, but it's an average of 15 clients each year who have been supported through an intensive 14-month non-residential treatment program and met the stringent requirements to graduate. It's 300 fewer individuals involved in crime to support their addiction. The financial savings for policing, the court system, the health care system, businesses, hospitals and emergency rooms, jails and correctional centres are significant.

The Court's success was recognized in a 2011 evaluation by Dr. Julian Somers of the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University. His analysis showed that drug-related recidivism of DTCV participants was reduced by 56% over a two-year period and overall criminal re-offending was lowered by 35%, even though at least 50% of the participants had been considered to be at "severe" risk to re-offend.

And in April 2012, the DTCV received a Premier's Innovation and Excellence Award in recognition of the excellent collaborative work of its multiple teams. The teams supporting participants provide a "wrap-around care model" helping participants access financial support and find housing. They work closely with the court team.

Reflecting on the Court's anniversary, Sharon Lockhart, Director of Integrated Programs at DTCV, said:

"The Drug Treatment Court of Vancouver has had a significant positive impact on participants over the past two decades. Changing people's lives with evidence-based support and programs is a key element to a client's success in the program. Clients in DTCV receive continued support and encouragement from caring and dedicated court and treatment team staff throughout the 14-month non-residential treatment program. Building trust and being able to bridge clients into meaningful programs and connections in the community assists with community integration and is the best outcome for successful graduates of the DTCV program."

The role of the judge is a key component in a participant's success. It means a great deal to many clients to have the lengthy engagement with and encouragement from a judge that DTCV provides.

The judges assigned to preside in DTCV over the last two decades have considered it among the most rewarding experiences of their careers. Judge Jane Godfrey was the first judge to preside over DTCV. Her vision, hard work, perseverance, and compassion guided it successfully through its first four years as a "pilot project" and beyond. In March 2006, the Trial Lawyers Association of British Columbia recognized Judge Godfrey's pioneering work by presenting her with a Certificate of Appreciation.

Other judges assigned to DTCV over the years include Judges Jocelyn Palmer, Jeanne Watchuk, Maris McMillan, James Wingham, and Laura Bakan.

Judge Harbans Dhillon, who has sat in DTCV since 2014, told the Vancouver Sun in 2016:

"It is a great honour and privilege to be doing this work and to be really seeing the community in all its difficulties and trying to find justice in it. I had been a judge for 15 years and had done work in every area of the court. I was interested in doing drug treatment court because it provides a different view of justice.

In drug treatment court, an individual comes in and says, 'I am willing to plead guilty and accept responsibility. I'm an addict. I need treatment,' and, as a judge, I follow that individual and that individual's case until that person can get as far as they can in their treatment, including, we hope, to graduation, and we sentence at the end of that process.

It is said by many that this court's program is demanding. And it can be arduous. Sometimes it is easier just to do time in jail. But those who take this court's program know that they will become stabilized, and we hope, healthy and whole. And the research bears that out."

The Sun article by Kim Bolan, *Vancouver drug treatment court builds record of success*, (Vancouver Sun, March 7, 2016) captures the special relationship between judges in DTCV (and the Provincial Court's other [specialized courts](#)) and the courts' clients:

"She [Judge Dhillon] gets to know the people she sees week after week, which is evident on Tuesdays and Thursdays when those in the program arrive in courtroom 303 to check in. Dhillon asks how they're finding the intense program, but she also asks after family members, pets, even what character on Game of Thrones they like best. She offers encouragement when the reports in front of her show clean urine tests. She thanks them for their honesty when they admit they've slipped."

A DTCV graduate said of Judge Dhillon, "I have never experienced somebody who was so compassionate, encouraging and supportive."

On DTCV's 20th anniversary, Provincial Court Chief Judge Melissa Gillespie said,

"The Provincial Court of British Columbia congratulates and thanks everyone who has contributed to the work of the Drug Treatment Court of Vancouver in the last two decades: the lawyers from PPSC and Legal Services who are the mainstays of in-court supervision; the Provincial Crown for their collaborative file referrals; the Defence bar in encouraging their clients to have the courage to undertake court supervised treatment; Sheriff Services and Court Services staff for their daily support; members of the treatment teams staffed by Vancouver Coastal Health, BC Corrections and MSSD representatives who provide compassionate care for clients in recovery; Steering Committee members who provide guidance and oversight; our community partners, including Indigenous partners, who donate their time and expertise at the Drug Court Treatment and Resource Centre, and especially the Court's participants who work so hard to overcome their addiction. DTCV has helped hundreds of clients regain healthier lives and avoid reoffending."

[Drug Treatment Court of Vancouver](#)

[Vancouver drug treatment court builds record of success, Vancouver Sun \(March 7, 2016\)](#)

[Drug Treatment Court celebrates a graduation \(2015 article, updated 2024\)](#)

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